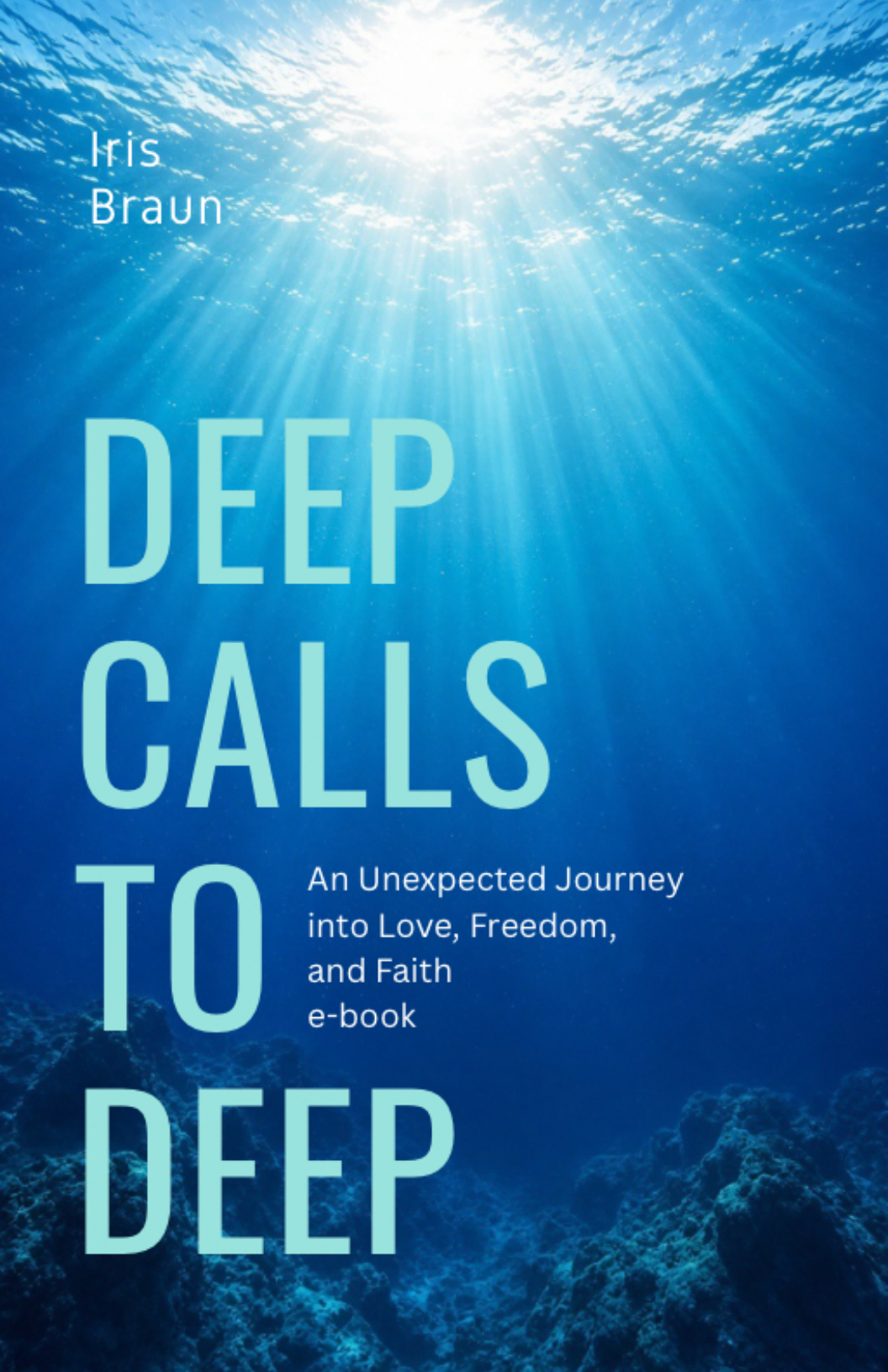
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TO
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An Unexpected Journey
into Love, Freedom,
and Faith
e-book

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP

An Unexpected Journey into Love, Freedom, and Faith

Iris Braun

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Thank you for being part of this journey.
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Dedication

For everyone who has ever wondered if they were doing love wrong.

For those who learned to be strong before they learned that it was safe to need someone.

For those who have loved an idea before they had the courage to discover the real person.

For those who have looked back at their lives and wondered, “ What if I had chosen differently?”

For those who are tired of rushing, guessing, performing, and trying to make everything happen.

And for those who are willing to slow down long enough to discover that there is another way.

May you find the courage to ask instead of guess, the freedom to love without losing yourself, and the faith to plant your seeds without demanding that you be the one who makes them grow.

And may you discover, somewhere along the way, that the deepest questions lead us to the deepest places.

And most of all **for Larry** who had the courage to ask:

"I want to know what love is. Can you tell me?"

This book began with your question. I carried it as my own. It will always be ours.

Deep calls to deep.

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DEEP CALLS TO DEEP

Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.

Psalm 42:7

Prologue

The Question Behind the Questions

I did not begin with relationships.
I began with God.

For a long time, I thought I was learning how to know God. I read Scripture. I prayed. I asked questions. I tried to understand what He wanted from me and what it meant to live a life that was genuinely shaped by Him.

But somewhere along the way, my questions changed. They became less about what I was supposed to believe and more about what a relationship with God actually looks like.

How does God relate to us?
What does He want from us?
What does He ask us to do, what does He ask us not to do, and what does He

give us freedom to decide for ourselves?
How does He respond when we get things wrong, when we walk away?

Does He force Himself into our lives, or does He wait for us to turn toward Him?

If love could be forced, it would not be love.

So He creates space.

And space can be left empty.

Does He answer questions we never ask, or does He invite us to ask?

The more I thought about these things, the more I began to see something I had not seen before.

Perhaps I had been looking at God's relationship with humanity as something primarily spiritual — something

belonging to faith, prayer, and the life between God and His children.

But what if it was more than that?

What if God's way of relating to us was also teaching us something about relationship itself?

The thought came suddenly.

I was driving home from work when it struck me with a clarity that made me stop and think:

Wait.

If God wants us to live a certain way in our relationship with Him, wouldn't He also want us to live that way with one another?

If He tells us to forgive, would He not want us to forgive one another?

If He gives us freedom, would He not want us to respect one another's freedom?

If He listens when we come to Him, should we not learn to listen to one another?

If He, who already knows everything, still invites us to ask — should we not, who know so little about each other, do the same with the people we love?

If He does not force us to love Him, what does that tell us about love?

If He does not shame us for needing Him, what does that tell us about need?

That needing is not a flaw in the design.
Maybe it is part of the design.

It felt like the first domino had fallen.

One question tipped over the next.

The questions began multiplying.

And suddenly, something that had seemed to belong only to my relationship with God began to illuminate the way I looked at human relationships.

I had never intended to write a book about this.

But once the question had been asked, I could not simply put it away.

Because if we are made in the image of God, then perhaps relationship is not something incidental to who we are.

Perhaps it is part of the image.

And if God is our Father, then perhaps we have something to learn from the way He relates to His children.

That raised another question.

Where do we actually learn how love works?

Most of us learn from people.

We watch our parents. We watch the adults around us. We observe friendships and marriages. We experience closeness and rejection, forgiveness and conflict, tenderness and distance.

We absorb things long before we have words for them.

And then we carry what we learned into the rest of our lives.

But what happens when the people who taught us about love were themselves still learning?

What happens when what we learned was incomplete?

What happens when we were taught that love means being useful, or strong, or self-sufficient, or always available?

What happens when we learned to guess instead of ask? When we learned that needing someone was weakness? When we learned to close the space where love wanted to move? When we learned to protect ourselves instead of remaining open?

Perhaps we do not always have a problem with loving.

Perhaps sometimes we simply have a problem with what we learned love was.

And perhaps we have another Teacher.

Not one who gives us a list of techniques, but one who shows us, through His relationship with us, what love can look like.

That realization became the beginning of a journey.

Not toward having all the answers, but toward asking better questions.

Because the more I looked, the more I realized something else:

We cannot truly know another person by guessing.
We have to ask.
We have to be willing to enter the space.

And perhaps that applies to God, too.

If I want to know what God wants, I have to ask Him.

If I want to understand how He sees something, I have to seek.

If there is a door I do not yet understand, perhaps I have to knock.

And once I began to see that, an ancient invitation suddenly sounded different.

Not like a verse I had heard many times before.

Like an invitation addressed directly to me.

Ask, and it will be given to you.
Seek, and you will find.
Knock, and the door will be opened to you.

Matthew 7:7-8

And that was where the next domino fell.

Ask.
Seek.
Knock.

Introduction

We are all learning how to love, even when we think we already know how.

We may have years of experience. We may have loved people deeply. We may have been married, divorced, parents, children, friends, partners, caregivers, leaders. We may have survived relationships that changed us and relationships that broke our hearts.

Still, the question remains:

Where did we learn how love works?

Most of us did not sit down one day and consciously choose our understanding of love.

We inherited much of it.

We learned from what we saw.

A child watches how adults respond when someone is afraid.

How do they react to mistakes?

What happens when someone says no, when someone needs help, when people disagree, when someone fails?

Does love become conditional?

Does anger become frightening?

Does silence become punishment?

Does forgiveness happen?

Does anyone ask questions?

Does anyone listen?

Does anyone say, “ Tell me what you need?”

We learn from all of it.

And because these lessons often begin before we can consciously evaluate

them, we may grow up believing that our particular experience of relationship is simply what relationship is.

Then we become adults.

And we bring those assumptions with us.

We may not even realize that we are carrying them.

We may believe that if someone loves us, they should know what we need without being told.

We may believe that if we love someone, we should automatically know what they need.

We may think that closeness means knowing what the other person is thinking, that strength means needing nobody, that caring means fixing, that love means staying no matter what, that

freedom means not needing anyone, that being needed means being loved.

And sometimes we discover, painfully, that the things we thought were expressions of love have actually made relationship more difficult.

So perhaps the first question is not:

How can we have better relationships?

Perhaps the first question is:

What if we have been learning love from the wrong places?

That does not mean that everything we learned was wrong.

It means that human beings are imperfect teachers.

Our parents were imperfect.

Our friends are imperfect.

We are imperfect.

Even when people love us deeply, they may love us through the limitations of what they themselves have learned.

So where do we go if we want to understand love more deeply?

For me, that question led back to God.

Not simply to the idea of God, not merely to doctrines about God, but to the relationship God has chosen to have with us.

Because if God is our Father, and if we are made in His image, then perhaps the way He relates to us tells us something important about who we were created to be.

Perhaps the way God loves us is not only something we are meant to receive.

Perhaps it is something we are meant to learn.

This changes the questions we ask.

Instead of beginning with:

What should I do to make my relationship work?

we can begin somewhere deeper:

What does God want relationship to look like?

What does He ask of us?

What does He not ask of us?

How does He treat our freedom?

How does He respond to our questions?

How does He respond when we fail?

How does He correct us?

How does He forgive?

How does He allow us to make choices?

How does He love without controlling?

How does He remain present without taking responsibility for choices that belong to us?

How does He invite rather than force?

And what does it mean that He could force us, but chooses to create space instead — space we are free to leave empty?

These are not merely theological questions.

They become profoundly practical when we begin to ask:

If this is how God relates to me, what does that teach me about how I should relate to you?

That was the thought that changed the direction of everything for me.

Because suddenly the relationship between God and humanity and the

relationships between human beings no longer seemed like two separate subjects.

They were connected.

If God asks us to forgive, perhaps forgiveness belongs in our human relationships too.

If God gives us freedom, perhaps we should not try to control the people we love.

If God does not require us to be perfect before He loves us, perhaps we should stop making love something people have to earn.

If God allows us to come to Him with our needs, perhaps needing someone is not automatically weakness.

Perhaps need was never meant to be overcome.

Perhaps it was meant to be lived.

If God listens when we speak, perhaps listening is part of love.

If God does not assume that we have nothing to ask, perhaps we should not assume that we already know everything about another person.

And perhaps one of the most important things God teaches us is this:

Ask.

Not because He does not know.

He knows.

But because relationship is not the same as information.

God could simply tell us everything.

Instead, He invites us to come.

To ask.

To seek.

To knock.

There is something deeply relational about that invitation.

He does not force Himself into our attention.

He does not overwhelm us with everything He knows.

He leaves room for us to turn toward Him.

And when we turn toward Him, He meets us there.

That raises an uncomfortable question for our human relationships.

How often do we assume we know what another person needs without ever asking?

How often do we interpret their silence, decide what they feel, construct an explanation in our own minds and then respond to our explanation as though it were fact?

Perhaps we call that intuition.

Perhaps sometimes it is.

But sometimes it is simply guessing.

And guessing becomes especially dangerous when we confuse it with knowing.

Because another person has an interior world we cannot see.

There are thoughts they have not spoken, needs they may not yet understand, fears they may not know how to name, desires they may be afraid to express, experiences we were not there to witness.

We cannot enter another person’s interior world by force.

We can only be invited in.

That is why questions matter.

A question says:

I know I cannot see everything that is happening inside you.

I could make up an answer, but I would rather hear yours.

You are important enough for me to ask.

Perhaps that is one of the simplest forms of respect.

And perhaps it is also one of the simplest forms of love.

This book is an exploration of what happens when we take that idea seriously.

What if the way God relates to us gives us a pattern for the way we relate to one another?

What if many of the things we struggle with in relationships begin to look different when we see them through that lens?

What if needing someone does not have to mean losing freedom?

What if freedom does not mean emotional distance?

What if love does not require us to rescue one another?

What if knowing someone means remaining curious rather than believing we have finally figured them out?

What if friendship and slowness are not signs that a relationship lacks intensity, but ways of allowing reality to emerge?

What if we do not have to perform our way into being loved?

What if we can stop trying to become responsible for another person's entire life?

What if we can learn to receive as well as give?

What if some of the things we have called weakness are actually invitations to become honest?

And what if the deepest answer to all of these questions does not begin with us at all?

What if it begins with God?

I do not want to pretend that I have arrived at the end of these questions.

I have not.

This book is not a collection of perfect answers.

It is an invitation to look again.

To go back to the Source.

To ask.

To seek.

To knock.

And then to see what happens when what we discover about God begins to change the way we love the people in front of us.

Because perhaps the way home to deeper human relationships is not to become better at managing one another.

Perhaps it is to become better at knowing the One in whose image we were made.

And perhaps, somewhere in that discovery, we will find that the deepest

call was never merely from one person to another.

It was from depth to depth.

From God to us.

And from what we discover in Him, back into the way we love one another.

Deep calls to deep.

PHASE I — THE DESIGN

Chapter One

Where Do We Learn How Love Works?

If we want to understand how to love another person, perhaps we should begin with a more fundamental question: Where did we learn what love is?

Most of us learned long before we had words for it.

We learned through experience.

A child does not begin life with a definition of love.

A child discovers love through relationship.

Through the face that looks back at them, through the arms that pick them up, through the voice that answers

when they cry, through the way someone responds when they are afraid, angry, confused, excited, or simply difficult.

We learn whether closeness is safe, whether our needs are welcome, whether mistakes can be repaired, whether saying no is allowed, whether love remains when we disappoint someone, whether we have to perform to be valued, whether people listen or simply tell us what they think we should feel.

And we carry those lessons forward.

Sometimes they serve us well.

Sometimes they don’t.

The people who first teach us about love are themselves human.

They may love us deeply and still not know how to love perfectly.

They may give us beautiful things and painful things at the same time.

They may teach us what to do, but also teach us what to fear.

They may model a kind of relationship we want to repeat, or one we spend the rest of our lives trying to escape.

And because we learn so much of this before we are old enough to question it, we may not realize that what feels like truth is sometimes simply what feels familiar.

That distinction matters.

Familiarity can be powerful.

If we grew up believing that love means anticipating another person's needs, we may become very good at anticipating.

If we learned that love means being useful, we may become indispensable.

If we learned that love means keeping the peace, we may avoid difficult conversations.

If we learned that needing someone is dangerous, we may become fiercely independent.

We may begin to believe that needing is weakness — that love would be purer if we needed less.

But what if that is backwards?

What if we were made to need, so that love would have somewhere to go?

If we learned that closeness can suddenly disappear, we may spend our lives watching for signs of distance.

And then we bring all of this into our adult relationships.

We may think we are simply being ourselves.

But often we are also repeating what we learned.

That realization does not require us to blame our parents.

They were learning too.

And perhaps they were carrying lessons they had received from people before them.

There is no end to that chain if we only look backward.

At some point, we have to ask whether there is another place from which we can learn.

For me, that question led to God.

If human beings are imperfect teachers of love, what happens when we look to the One who created us?

If we are made in His image, what does that tell us about relationship?

If God is our Father, what does His relationship with His children reveal about the kind of relationship He intended us to have?

These questions changed the way I began to read familiar things.

I started paying attention not only to what God tells us to believe, but to how He relates to us.

That distinction is important.

Because instructions tell us what to do.

Relationship reveals something about why.

Look at the way God gives freedom.

He could have created beings who have no choice but to obey.

Instead, He gives us the ability to choose.

He creates space.

Space that can be left empty.

Space that can be entered.

Look at the way He invites.

He calls, He speaks, He asks, He waits.

Look at the way He responds to our questions.

He does not condemn us simply because we do not understand.

Look at the way He responds to our failures.

Again and again, Scripture shows us a God who does not reduce a person to their worst moment.

Look at the way He corrects.

Correction is not the same as rejection.

Look at the way He loves.

His love is not presented as a reward for people who have finally become worthy of it.

And look at the way He allows us to grow.

God does not appear to be interested in turning us into machines that perform perfectly.

He wants relationships.

That alone raises a remarkable question:

If this is how God relates to us, what does He want our relationships with one another to look like?

Perhaps the answer is closer than we think.

If God gives us freedom, perhaps love should not become control.

If God listens, perhaps love should include listening.

If God invites us to speak, perhaps love should make room for another person's voice.

If God does not force Himself upon us, perhaps love does not force itself upon another person.

If God allows us to make choices and experience consequences, perhaps loving someone does not mean taking responsibility for every decision they make.

If God forgives, perhaps forgiveness belongs in human relationships.

If God allows growth to take time, perhaps we should be careful about

demanding that another person change according to our timetable.

If God knows us completely and still loves us, perhaps we can learn to let another person be known without requiring them to become someone else.

And if God tells us to ask, seek, and knock, perhaps we should become people who ask rather than guess.

This is where the connection became impossible for me to ignore.

I had been thinking about how God wants us to relate to Him.

And then suddenly I saw it:

Why would God teach us one way of relating to Him and expect us to live by completely different rules with one another?

If He wants us to forgive, why would He want us to hold one another hostage to past mistakes?

If He wants us to love, why would He want love to become a system of performance?

If He gives us freedom, why would He want us to possess one another?

If He invites us to ask, why would He want us to pretend we can know what another person needs without asking?

If He tells us not to judge, why would He want us to reduce one another to our failures?

Perhaps the things God asks of us are not arbitrary rules placed on top of our lives.

Perhaps they reveal something about the kind of people we were created to become.

And perhaps the way He relates to us reveals something about the kind of relationships we were created to have.

That does not mean human relationships will ever perfectly reproduce the relationship between God and humanity.

They cannot.

God is God.

We are not.

There are things only God can be.

But we are made in His image.

And perhaps that means that something of His way of relating can be reflected in ours — not by trying harder, but by asking and receiving.

Not perfectly, but genuinely.

A reflection does not become the original.

It simply shows something of what the original looks like.

Maybe that is part of what it means to be made in God's image.

We are not only called to know something about Him.

We are invited to become people through whom something of His character becomes visible, including the way we love.

That changes the starting point of the relationship conversation.

Instead of asking how can I get this person to love me, we can ask what does love look like from God's perspective.

Instead of asking how do I make this relationship work, we can ask what kind of person is God asking me to be within this relationship.

Instead of asking how do I make the other person change, we can ask what is mine to do, what belongs to them, and what belongs to God?

Those questions may not make relationships easier.

But they may make them truer.

And perhaps truth is where deeper love begins.

Because once we stop trying to invent our own definition of love, we become free to discover one.

Not a perfect formula, not a technique, but a way of living, a way of seeing, a way of relating.

And that journey begins with something Jesus told us to do long before we understood how important it might become:

Ask.

Because if we want to know how God wants us to love, we have to be willing to ask Him.

And if we want to know how another person wants to be loved, we may have to be willing to ask them.

Perhaps the two questions are not as unrelated as they first appear.

Perhaps both begin with the same humility:

Tell me.

Show me.

I am willing to learn.

I don’t want to assume I already know.

I want to know you.

So I will ask.

And that was where I realized — I thought I knew what asking meant.

Chapter Two

Ask, Don’t Guess

There is a strange thing we do with the people we love.

We spend enormous amounts of time trying to understand them, and yet sometimes we never actually ask them what we want to know.

We watch their expressions.

We listen to their tone of voice.

We remember what happened last time.

We compare today’s silence with yesterday’s conversation.

We notice what they do and what they don’t do.

And then, somewhere along the way, we turn all of those observations into conclusions.

She must be upset.

He probably doesn't need me.

They don't really want to talk.

If they loved me, they would know.

I know what he needs.

Sometimes we are right.

But sometimes we are not.

And the problem is not that we noticed something.

The problem begins when we confuse observation with knowledge.

There is an entire world inside another person that we cannot see.

We can stand beside someone for years and still not know every thought they have had, every fear they carry, every hope they have never spoken aloud, or every reason behind a decision they made.

We cannot see another person's interior world.

We can only be invited into it.

That changes the meaning of a question.

A real question is not simply a request for information.

It is an acknowledgment of another person's freedom.

When I ask you what you need, I am admitting that I don't know.

When I ask you what you meant, I am admitting that my interpretation may be wrong.

When I ask you how you feel, I am giving you the right to tell me something different from what I expected.

And perhaps that is one of the most important things love can do:

make room for the other person to be the authority on their own inner world.

We often say that we want to know someone deeply.

But deep knowing requires curiosity.

And curiosity cannot survive the belief that we already know everything.

This is where my understanding of God's relationship with us began to change the way I understood human relationships.

Because God knows everything about us.

He does not need us to explain ourselves to Him.

He knows what we need before we ask.

He knows our thoughts before we speak them.

And yet He still invites us to ask.

Ask, and it will be given to you.
Seek, and you will find.
Knock, and the door will be opened.

Why?

If God already knows, why does He tell us to ask?

Perhaps He could give without our asking.

Perhaps He chooses not to.

Perhaps He is showing us that love does not force itself even when it knows.

Perhaps because relationship is not simply about transferring information from one person who knows to another who doesn't.

God is not waiting for us to give Him information He lacks.

He is inviting us into relationship.

He wants us to turn toward Him.

To seek Him.

To speak to Him.

To listen.

To participate.

He could simply tell us everything.

Instead, He invites us to come.

There is something beautiful in that.

And there is something challenging in it, too.

Because if God Himself invites us to ask rather than simply giving us everything without our participation, perhaps we should pay attention to what that teaches us about relationship.

Maybe love does not mean anticipating everything.

Maybe love means being interested enough to ask.

This is especially important because guessing can feel like love.

Sometimes it even looks like love.

I know you so well.

I know exactly what you need.

I know what you're thinking.

You don't have to tell me.

But there is a hidden danger in that kind of certainty.

The other person can disappear behind our interpretation of them.

We may stop meeting the actual person and begin relating to the person we have constructed in our minds.

That person may be partly real.

But they are still partly ours.

And no matter how lovingly we constructed them, they are not the other person.

This is one of the reasons relationships can become so confusing.

Two people can be standing in the same room, having completely different conversations without realizing it.

One person is responding to what they believe the other means.

The other person is responding to what they believe the first person means.

And neither has actually asked.

A silence becomes rejection.

A delay becomes indifference.

A question becomes criticism.

A boundary becomes abandonment.

A need becomes weakness.

A desire for space becomes a lack of love.

And once we have attached meaning to something, we tend to look for evidence that confirms what we already believe.

We stop asking.

We start proving.

That is dangerous territory.

Because love requires us to remain open to the possibility that our interpretation is incomplete.

Sometimes the most loving sentence we can say is:

“Help me understand.”

Not:

“I know why you did that.”

Not:

“You obviously don’t care.”

Not:

“I know exactly what you’re feeling.”

But:

“Help me understand.”

There is humility in those words.

And humility creates space.

Space for truth.

Space for correction.

Space for the other person to surprise us.

Space for a relationship to become something different from what we expected.

Perhaps this is also why asking can be vulnerable.

If I guess, I remain in control.

If I ask, I have to wait for an answer.

And the answer may not be what I wanted.

That is the risk.

I may ask, “What do you need from me?” and hear something I did not expect.

I may ask, “How did that make you feel?” and discover that my intentions did not change the impact.

I may ask, “What do you want?” and find out that what you want is different from what I wanted for you.

But that is exactly where freedom enters the relationship.

If I love you, I cannot love only the version of you whose answers make me comfortable.

I have to make room for the actual you.

And perhaps this is where God’s example becomes even more challenging.

God does not need to control us in order to remain God.

He gives us room.

He allows us to choose.

He allows us to ask.

He allows us to resist.

He allows us to walk away.

And still He calls.

Still He invites.

Still He leaves the door open.

That kind of love is very different from possession.

And if we are meant to learn from Him, perhaps our relationships need more of that kind of freedom, too.

Not freedom from relationship.

Freedom within relationship.

The freedom to speak.

The freedom to ask.

The freedom to say no.

The freedom to say yes.

The freedom to admit, I don’t know.

The freedom to say, I need you.

The freedom to say, I need some space.

The freedom to say, That hurt me.

The freedom to say, I was wrong.

The freedom to say, I don’t understand you yet.

And perhaps most importantly:

the freedom to remain a person we are still discovering.

Because we never finish knowing another human being.

There is no final moment when we can honestly say:

I know you completely.

There will always be another question.

Another story.

Another layer.

Another experience that changes the way we understand what came before.

That is not a failure of intimacy.

It may actually be part of intimacy.

Perhaps love stays alive because there is always more to discover.

This is true of our relationship with God, too.

We can know God genuinely without ever exhausting Him.

We can know Him deeply and still have questions.

We can walk with Him for years and still discover something we had never seen before.

Knowing does not eliminate mystery.

It creates a deeper hunger to know more.

And perhaps that hunger is not a problem to solve.

Perhaps it is part of what relationship is.

The moment we believe we have completely figured out another person, curiosity disappears.

And when curiosity disappears, we stop asking.

When we stop asking, we start assuming.

And when we start assuming, we may eventually find ourselves relating not to the person in front of us, but to the story we have created about them.

So perhaps one of the simplest disciplines of love is also one of the hardest:

Ask.

Ask before interpreting.

Ask before defending.

Ask before deciding what someone meant.

Ask before deciding what they need.

Ask because they are worth knowing.

And then do something just as important:

Listen to the answer.

Because asking without listening is simply another form of control.

The goal is not to collect information.

The goal is to encounter the person.

And perhaps that is what God has been inviting us into all along.

Ask.

Seek.

Knock.

Not because He is hiding from us.

But because relationship requires participation.

And perhaps when we learn to approach God that way, something changes in the way we approach one another.

We stop trying to be omniscient.

We stop pretending we already know.

We become curious again.

We become teachable again.

And maybe that is where deeper love begins:

not with certainty,

but with the courage to ask,

“Tell me.”

Because as long as I assume I already know, I will never need to receive you.

Chapter Three

The Courage to Say, “I Need You”

There is a sentence many of us find surprisingly difficult to say.

Not because the words are complicated.

Because of what we have learned to believe they mean.

I need you.

For some people, those words feel warm and natural.

For others, they feel almost dangerous.

They can sound like dependence. Weakness. Loss of control. An invitation to be hurt.

Perhaps somewhere along the way, we learned that strong people do not need anyone.

They manage. They cope. They solve. They carry. They give. They are there for everyone else.

And when they need something themselves, they try not to show it.

Maybe they learned that needing someone gives that person power.

Maybe they learned that people leave.

Maybe they learned that asking for too much makes them a burden.

Maybe they learned that the safest thing is to need as little as possible.

So they become very good at saying:

“I’m fine.”

Even when they aren’t.

But if we go back to the question we have been asking throughout this book — What can we learn from the way God

relates to us? — something interesting happens.

Because God did not create us to be completely self-sufficient.

He created us for relationship.

From the beginning, the story of humanity is not the story of an isolated individual who has everything they need within themselves.

It is the story of relationship.

With God. With one another. With creation.

We were not designed to exist as sealed-off systems.

We were designed to receive. To give. To depend. To belong.

We were not designed to make love out of nothing. We were designed to receive it first.

And yet somewhere along the way, dependence became something many of us learned to fear.

Perhaps we confused dependence with helplessness.

But they are not the same thing.

Helplessness says:

I cannot do anything without you.

Healthy dependence can say:

I could survive without you, but I don't want to live as though I have to do everything alone.

There is a profound difference.

One removes freedom. The other makes room for connection.

God does not ask us to become helpless.

He invites us to trust Him. He invites us to receive from Him. He tells us to ask. He tells us to seek. He tells us to knock.

Those are not the instructions of a God who expects us to have everything within ourselves.

They are the invitations of a God who wants us to come to Him.

And perhaps that tells us something about need itself.

Maybe the problem is not that we need.

Maybe the problem is what we believe our need says about us.

If I need you, does that mean I am less?
If I need help, does that mean I have failed?
If I miss you, does that mean I am dependent?

We have created an entire hierarchy around independence.

The less you need, the stronger you are. The more you can carry alone, the more admirable you become.

But where did we learn that? And is it actually true?

Look at God.

God does not shame us for coming to Him with our needs.

He does not say:

You should have been able to handle this yourself.

He does not become irritated because we came back again.

He invites us. Again. And again. And again.

Perhaps one of the most beautiful things about prayer is that it allows us to say something we may find difficult to say anywhere else:

I cannot do this alone.

And God does not seem offended by that sentence.

Perhaps He already knew.

Maybe the point was never to prove that we could manage without Him.

Maybe the point was to discover that we were never meant to.

If that is true, then what does it mean for our relationships with other people?

Perhaps we need to rethink the sentence:

“I need you.”

Not as a demand. Not as a declaration of ownership.

Not as:

You are responsible for making me whole.

But as an honest recognition:

Your presence matters to me.
What we have matters to me.
There are things I cannot experience in exactly the same way without you.

There is vulnerability in saying that.

Because the moment we admit that someone matters, we also admit that they can affect us.

They can disappoint us. They can leave. They can say no.

And that is precisely why saying I need you requires courage.

It does not guarantee an answer.

Love never does.

Maybe strength is not avoiding that vulnerability altogether.

Maybe strength is being able to remain open even when openness carries risk.

Maybe strength is being able to say:

I need you, but I will not possess you.
I love you, but I will not control you.
Your presence matters to me, but your freedom still belongs to you.

This is where need and freedom meet.

And perhaps that is one of the great paradoxes of love:

The deeper the relationship, the more honest we can become about how much the other person matters.

And the deeper the love, the more willing we become to protect their freedom.

God does not need to possess us in order to love us.

And perhaps neither should we.

He gives without needing us to remain small so that He can remain important.

He does not seem threatened by our growth.

That matters. Because real love does not need another person to remain broken in order to feel valuable.

We were never meant to be everything for one another.

That is too much weight to place on another human being.

Only God can occupy that place.

But that does not mean we should need nothing from each other.

It means we can need one another without asking one another to be God.

Because when I ask another person to be what only God can be, I eventually make demands they were never created to meet.

I ask them to heal everything. To understand everything. To always be available. To never disappoint me.

No human being can carry that.

And perhaps love becomes lighter when we stop asking another person to carry what belongs to God.

Then I need you can become what it was meant to be.

Not:

“Complete me.”

But:

“Share this life with me.”

Not:

“Save me.”

But:

“Walk with me.”

And maybe that is the freedom we have been looking for all along.

The freedom to need. The freedom to give. The freedom to receive. The freedom to remain ourselves while becoming deeply connected to another person.

Because perhaps love does not ask us to need less.

Perhaps it asks us to need honestly.

We can simply tell the truth.

You matter to me.

And because you matter to me, I want to learn how to make room for you — not just for the parts of you that are easy to love.

And that was when I began to understand: needing is not enough if we do not make space.

Chapter Four

What If the Answer Is Different From What I Expected?

There is something we don't always consider when we ask a question.

We might be prepared to hear an answer.

But are we prepared to hear an answer we didn't want?

Asking is easy when we already know what we hope the other person will say.

It becomes much harder when we realize that a genuine question gives the other person freedom.

They may surprise us.

They may disagree.

They may say yes.

They may say no.

They may say, “ I don’t know.”

They may tell us something we would rather not hear.

And suddenly we discover that asking was not simply about getting information.

It was about surrendering control.

This is one of the reasons guessing can feel safer.

When I guess what you think, I can choose the answer.

When I decide what you need, I remain in control of the story.

When I assume what you meant, I don’t have to risk hearing something different.

But when I ask you, I have to wait.

And waiting requires trust.

This is where the connection to God becomes important again.

God asks us to choose.

He invites us. He calls us. He gives us opportunities to respond.

But He does not appear to need to control our response in order to remain God.

We can say yes. We can say no. We can hesitate. We can question.

And still, somehow, God remains God.

His love does not depend upon our immediate compliance.

That is difficult for us to imitate.

Because when we love someone, we often want a particular answer.

We ask:

Do you love me?

But secretly we are asking:

Please tell me you love me in the way I need you to.

We ask:

What do you need?

And then feel disappointed when the answer is something we don't want to give.

That is not really asking.

That is offering a question with a preferred answer attached.

Real questions leave room for reality.

And reality does not always cooperate with our expectations.

To ask is to admit I need to receive something I don't already have.

If I ask you what you need, I have to be willing to hear it.

If I ask you how you feel, I have to be willing to discover that my intentions were not the same as your experience.

If I ask whether you need space, I have to accept that the answer might be yes.

That does not mean rejection.

It means the other person is a person.

They have a will. A history. A rhythm.

Their freedom does not diminish my worth.

Their no does not automatically mean I am unwanted.

Their different opinion does not make them my enemy.

And perhaps learning this is one of the great transitions from immature love to mature love.

Immature love often says:

“I want you to make me feel secure.”

Mature love begins to say:

“I want you to be free enough to tell me the truth.”

Those are very different desires.

One asks the other person to manage my emotions.

The other asks them to be honest.

And honesty can be uncomfortable.

But without honesty, what exactly are we loving?

If I only want the version of you that agrees with me, then I am not really making room for you.

I am making room for my preferred version of you.

We can create an image of another person that feels wonderful.

We imagine who they are. What they think. How they will respond.

Sometimes we even fall in love with that image.

And then reality arrives.

The actual person speaks. Has preferences. Has boundaries.

And we have a choice.

We can punish reality for failing to match our imagination.

Or we can become curious about reality.

Perhaps this is one of the differences between being in love with an idea of

someone and actually learning to love the person.

The first is built from certainty.

The second requires discovery.

That does not mean abandoning discernment.

Love is not blindness. Quite the opposite.

Love sees more clearly because it is willing to see what is actually there.

And that kind of relationship gives us permission to become honest.

We can bring God our anger. Our confusion. Our disappointment. Our doubts.

He is not threatened when we say:

I don’t understand.

Perhaps that teaches us something important about human relationship:

A relationship strong enough to contain the truth is stronger than one that depends on pretending.

If I cannot tell you what I really think, then you cannot truly know me.

If you cannot tell me what you really need, then I cannot truly know you.

We may remain close. We may even remain kind.

But there will be a distance between us created by everything that has not been said.

That is why asking matters.

And why listening matters even more.

Because asking opens the door.

Listening determines whether the other person feels safe enough to walk through it.

Perhaps that is what we are offering one another when we love well.

Not the promise that we will always agree.

But something perhaps more valuable:

You are safe enough to tell me the truth.

That sentence can change a relationship.

Because when someone knows they can tell you the truth, they no longer have to spend so much energy managing your reaction.

They can stop performing. They can stop hiding.

And then something unexpected happens.

You begin to meet the real person.

Not the carefully edited version.

The real person.

And perhaps that is where intimacy begins.

Not when two people finally agree on everything.

But when two people become free enough to be known.

And if that is true, then perhaps some of the risk we experience in relationships is not evidence that something has gone wrong.

Perhaps it is part of what makes genuine love possible.

Because there is no meaningful yes without the possibility of no.

There is no genuine trust without the possibility of betrayal.

When someone chooses to stay, chooses to listen, chooses to tell us the truth, we can know that their choice actually belongs to them.

It was not forced.

It was given freely.

And perhaps that is the kind of love God has been showing us all along.

Not:

“I will make you love me.”

But:

“I will invite you.”

Not:

“You must become perfect before you belong.”

But:

“Come.”

And maybe this is where our questions become even deeper.

If I really want to love you, am I willing to let you answer honestly?

If I really want to be known, am I willing to tell you the truth about myself?

Perhaps these questions do not give us immediate answers.

Maybe they are not supposed to.

Perhaps they simply open another door.

And once again, we find ourselves standing before it.

Knock. Then wait.

PHASE II — FREEDOM

Chapter Five

Freedom Is Not Distance

We have already touched something that can feel almost contradictory.

We want to be loved.
We want to belong.
We want to know that someone is there.
And at the same time, we want to be free.

Perhaps we have been taught to think that these two things compete with one another.

If I am truly free, I must not need you.

If I truly need you, I must give up some of my freedom.

But what if we have misunderstood freedom?

What if freedom does not mean being untouched by anyone?

What if freedom means being able to remain fully yourself while being deeply connected to another person?

That is a very different idea.

And once again, I find myself looking at God.

Because God does not seem to define relationship as the absence of freedom.

He creates relationship and gives freedom at the same time.

He invites us toward Him, but He does not force us.

He calls, but He does not drag us.

He loves, but He does not possess.

And that means something important: God's love does not require the destruction of our freedom.

If anything, He seems to want our freely given response.

A forced yes would not really be the same thing as love.

A controlled relationship may look secure from the outside, but there is something missing inside it.

Choice.

And without choice, there can be obedience, compliance, habit, fear.

But can there truly be love?

This is one of the reasons freedom matters so much in human relationships.

If I have to control you in order to keep you close, then perhaps I do not really trust love.

I trust control. I trust pressure. I trust obligation.

But love asks something harder of me.

It asks me to leave room for your choice.

That can be frightening.

Because if you are free, you are free to choose me.

But you are also free not to.

And there is no way around that.

We sometimes try to eliminate this uncertainty by creating invisible obligations.

After everything I've done for you, you should…
If you really loved me, you would…
I need you, so you have to…

These can sound like expressions of loyalty.

But underneath them may be an attempt to remove the other person's freedom.

And once freedom disappears, something else disappears with it.

The meaning of the choice.

If I cannot say no, then my yes becomes less meaningful.

If I cannot leave, then staying tells me less.

If I am not allowed to be myself, then the person you love is partly an invention.

Perhaps this is why genuine love requires courage from both people.

One person has to be brave enough to remain free.

The other has to be brave enough to allow that freedom.

That sounds simple.
It isn't.

Because love makes us vulnerable to loss.

This is where trust enters.

Trust does not mean believing that another person will always do exactly what we want.

Trust means believing that the relationship can survive the truth.

It means being able to hear:

I don't want that.

without automatically hearing:

I don't want you.

It means being able to hear:

I need some time alone.

without immediately hearing:

You are no longer important to me.

It means allowing:

I see this differently.

without turning difference into rejection.

Perhaps this is one of the places where we need to learn to separate difference from disconnection.

Two people can disagree and remain connected.

Two people can need different things and still love one another.

God did not create us as copies.

He created human beings with extraordinary individuality.

And if diversity is part of His creation, perhaps we should expect some difference within our relationships.

Maybe the goal is not to eliminate difference.

Maybe it is to learn how to love within it.

That requires curiosity again.

Instead of asking:

How do I get you to see this the way I do?

we can ask:

Help me understand why you see it differently.

Instead of:

Why don't you need what I need?

we can ask:

What does this look like for you?

And suddenly the other person is no longer a problem to solve.

They are a person to discover.

This brings us back to something we said earlier: We cannot truly know someone by guessing.

But freedom takes that one step further.

Even when someone tells us who they are, we still do not get to own that knowledge.

Knowing someone does not give us possession of them.

It gives us responsibility.

If you tell me what you need, I am entrusted with something vulnerable.

If you tell me what hurts you, I am entrusted with something vulnerable.

Love should make that knowledge safer, not more dangerous.

And perhaps this is another thing we can learn from God.

God knows us completely.

And yet His knowledge of us is not used as a weapon against us.

His knowledge is joined to love.

That is a profound model for human relationship.

Because the more we know about someone, the more power we potentially have over them.

We know what frightens them.

We know what hurts them.

We know what they long for.

And we have a choice about what we do with that knowledge.

We can use it to manipulate.

Or we can use it to love.

That may be one of the clearest tests of intimacy.

What do you do with what someone has trusted you to know?

Do you use it to get your way?
Or do you protect it?

Do you bring it up later to win an argument?
Or do you remember that there is a human being behind the information?

Perhaps real intimacy is not simply knowing more.

It is becoming more trustworthy with what we know.

And that leads somewhere else.

Because if we want freedom in our relationships, we have to become people who can be trusted with freedom.

That means we cannot demand access to everything simply because we love someone.

We cannot assume that closeness means complete transparency at every moment.

We cannot turn every boundary into an accusation.

There are things inside every human being that belong to that person.

There is an inner room.

A place where thoughts are still forming.

Where feelings are being understood.

Where prayer happens.

Perhaps we need to respect that room.

Not because we want distance.

But because we respect the person.

And perhaps this is where our relationship with God teaches us something again.

There is a mystery in every human being.

Even God does not erase our individuality by drawing us into relationship with Him.

He knows us.
He loves us.
He calls us.

And still, somehow, he allows us to remain ourselves.

Maybe that is what love is supposed to do.

Not absorb another person.

Not erase their edges.

Not make them into an extension of ourselves.

But create a place where two whole people can meet.

Two people who can say:

I am me.
You are you.
And there is room for both of us here.

That may be a deeper kind of closeness than the kind that demands constant proximity.

Because distance and freedom are not the same thing.

Someone can be physically close and emotionally controlled.

Someone can be physically distant and deeply connected.

Freedom is not measured in meters.

It is measured in whether a person can remain truthful.

Can they say what they think?

Can they say what they need?

Can they disagree?

Can they grow?

Can they become more themselves?

Perhaps that is one of the great gifts we can give someone we love: the freedom to become more fully who God created them to be.

Not who we need them to be.

Not who we imagined them to be.

But who they are becoming.

And perhaps we need to ask the same question of ourselves.

Am I free to become who God created me to be?

Or am I constantly trying to become who I think someone else needs me to be?

These questions can be uncomfortable.

But perhaps discomfort is not always a sign that something is wrong.

Sometimes discomfort is simply the feeling of discovering something true.

And perhaps the truth is this:

Love does not make us smaller.

The right kind of love gives us room to grow.

Room to breathe.

Room to question.

Room to become.

And if that is what God's relationship with us is teaching us, then perhaps freedom is not the opposite of intimacy after all.

Perhaps freedom is one of the conditions that makes genuine intimacy possible.

Because freedom is the space where love can be received.

Because I can only truly give myself to you if I am free to choose.

And you can only truly give yourself to me if you are free to choose.

So perhaps the deepest form of closeness is not:

“I cannot live without you.”

Perhaps it is:

“I am free, and I choose you.”

Chapter Six

I Am Free — And I Choose You

Freedom can sound like a very beautiful idea.

We need freedom.

We need room to breathe.

We need the right to say no.

We need the ability to remain ourselves.

But there is another side to freedom that we don't talk about quite as much.

Freedom is not only the freedom from something. It is also the freedom for something.

I can be free from control.

But what will I do with that freedom?

I can be free from obligation.

But what will I choose?

I can be free to walk away.

But what if I choose to stay?

Perhaps this is where love becomes something more than simply giving each other space.

Because love is not only:

“You are free.”

It is also:

“And with that freedom, I choose you.”

That distinction matters.

If I stay with you only because I have no other option, my staying may look like devotion.

But it isn’t freely given.

If I remain because I am afraid to leave, that is not the same as choosing you.

If I remain because I feel guilty, that is not the same as choosing you.

But if I am free to leave and I choose to stay, something different is happening.

My presence becomes a gift.

Not an obligation.

Not a performance.

A choice.

Perhaps this is part of what makes God's relationship with us so extraordinary.

He does not seem interested in creating people who have no alternative but Him.

He wants relationship.

And relationship requires a response.

That means freedom has to exist.

We can turn toward Him.

We can turn away.

We can question.

We can return.

And somehow, His invitation remains.

That does not mean that every choice is equally good.

Freedom does not make consequences disappear.

But it means that God does not need to destroy our ability to choose in order to keep us close.

Perhaps He wants something much more meaningful than forced closeness.

He wants our freely given hearts.

And maybe this teaches us something about human love.

Perhaps we have sometimes asked the wrong question.

Instead of:

“How can I make sure you stay?”

We could ask:

“What would make staying something you want to choose?”

Instead of:

“How do I keep you from leaving?”

We could ask:

“How can I become someone with whom you are free to be yourself?”

Instead of:

“How do I make myself indispensable?”

We could ask:

“How can I love you without needing you to need me?”

These questions lead somewhere very different.

They take us away from control.

And toward invitation.

Perhaps love is less about securing a person and more about creating a relationship in which two people can freely keep choosing one another.

Not once.

But repeatedly.

Today.

Tomorrow.

After a difficult conversation.

After disappointment.

Because we are never choosing the exact same person twice.

We are choosing a person who is changing.

And so are we.

The person I chose yesterday may have learned something new today.

They may have discovered a need they didn't know they had.

They may have become more honest.

More themselves.

And if I love them only as the person I first imagined, I may eventually find myself disappointed by the person they become.

But if I remain curious, I can keep discovering them.

Perhaps this is one reason love cannot be reduced to a feeling.

Feelings change.

People change.

Circumstances change.

Dreams change.

Even our understanding of ourselves changes.

And yet love can continue because love is not simply the feeling of being attracted to someone.

It is also the willingness to keep encountering the real person.

To keep asking.

To keep listening.

To keep choosing.

That does not mean staying in every relationship regardless of what happens.

Freedom means that sometimes leaving is the right choice.

Love does not require us to remain where there is destruction.

It does not require us to tolerate cruelty.

But even when a relationship ends, freedom remains part of the dignity of both people.

Perhaps love is not proven by how long we can keep someone.

Perhaps sometimes love is proven by whether we can respect their humanity even when we cannot keep them.

That brings us back to God.

God’s love is not diminished by our freedom.

He remains faithful even when we wander.

He does not need to force our response.

Perhaps this is why the biblical pattern is so often an invitation.

Come.

Ask.

Seek.

Knock.

Love creates the space, but we still have to enter it.

And maybe that is what makes relationships beautiful.

Someone can open the door for you.

They can invite you in.

They can make the space welcoming.

But they cannot make your heart choose to enter.

The choice remains yours.

And perhaps we need to offer that same dignity to the people we love.

I can tell you that I want you.

I can tell you that you matter.

I can make room for you.

But I cannot make you choose me.

And perhaps I shouldn't want to.

Because if I have to make you choose me, then what exactly have I won?

A person beside me is not the same thing as a person who has freely chosen to be beside me.

There is a difference between having someone and being chosen by someone.

One is possession.

The other is relationship.

And perhaps this is why freedom can make love more frightening and more beautiful at the same time.

Because freedom means there are no absolute guarantees.

But it also means that every freely given act of love means something.

When you stay, it means something.

When you listen, it means something.

When you forgive, it means something.

When you say, **“I am still here,”** it means something.

Not because you had to be.

Because you chose to be.

And perhaps this is one of the things we can learn from God's love:

He does not merely ask us to belong.

He invites us to respond.

And perhaps our human relationships need the same space.

Not:

"You belong to me."

But:

"You are free — and I am grateful that you choose to share your life with me."

That sentence carries both intimacy and freedom.

It does not erase need.

It does not deny attachment.

Need is not a flaw in the design. It is part of the design.

Freedom simply means we stop using need to make someone stay.

It simply refuses to turn love into ownership.

And perhaps that is the kind of freedom that allows love to breathe.

Two people standing beside each other.

Not because they have no choice.

Not because they are afraid to leave.

But because, in the middle of all the freedom God has given them,

they keep choosing one another.

And perhaps that is when freedom stops feeling like distance.

And begins to feel like love.

PHASE III — KNOWING

Chapter Seven

The Person I Think I Know

There is a strange thing that happens when we become close to someone.

The more time we spend with them, the more certain we become that we know them.

We recognize their voice.

We know what makes them laugh.

We know what they usually order.

And slowly, without even noticing it, we begin to fill in the spaces we don’t know.

We assume.

We predict.

We complete the picture.

It feels like knowing.

But sometimes it is simply familiarity mixed with imagination.

Perhaps that is one of the most dangerous things about human relationships.

We stop asking questions because we think we already know the answers.

We know what they mean.

We know why they did it.

We know what they need.

We know what they will say.

And because we know all of this — or believe that we do — we stop being curious.

The relationship becomes familiar.

But familiarity is not the same thing as knowing.

A person is not a finished story. Neither are we.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons God never seems to treat us as finished.

He knows us completely, and yet He continues to call us forward.

He knows who we have been.

He knows who we are.

And somehow, He also sees who we are becoming.

That is very different from putting someone into a box and deciding that we already understand them.

Maybe God knows us without reducing us.

Perhaps that is what we need to learn.

Because when we think we know someone completely, we often stop seeing them.

We begin seeing our idea of them.

And the difference can be almost invisible.

Someone becomes quiet.

I think I know why.

Someone doesn’t answer.

I know what that means.

Someone needs distance.

I know what they are really saying.

But do I?

Or am I simply filling an empty space with my own interpretation?

This is where the invitation to ask instead of guess becomes much more than a communication technique.

It becomes an attitude toward another human being.

It says:

I don't want to reduce you to what I think I know about you.

I want to remain curious.

I want to leave room for you to surprise me.

And perhaps this is one of the deepest forms of respect we can offer someone.

To admit:

I don't know everything about you.

That sentence might sound like a limitation.

Perhaps it is actually an expression of love.

Because if I admit that I don't fully know you, I remain willing to discover you.

And discovery keeps relationships alive.

Think about what happens when we first meet someone we find fascinating.

We ask questions.

We want to know their stories.

What do they love? What have they experienced? What makes them afraid?

We listen.

We remember.

We notice.

Everything is interesting because everything is new.

Then time passes.

And sometimes the very thing that once made the person fascinating — the fact that they were unknown — becomes something we unconsciously eliminate.

We decide we know them.

But perhaps the goal of a long relationship should not be to reach the point where there is nothing left to discover.

Perhaps it should be to become better at discovering.

Because there is always more.

People change.

Circumstances change.

Our understanding changes.

A person can reveal something about themselves today that they didn’t have words for five years ago.

They may discover something about themselves while talking to us.

They may not even know the answer when we ask.

And that is okay.

Sometimes a question does not produce an immediate answer.

Sometimes it creates the space in which an answer can eventually grow.

Perhaps that is true in our relationship with God as well.

We ask.

And sometimes the answer comes quickly.

Sometimes it comes slowly.

Sometimes we think we have received an answer and later realize we understood only part of it.

Sometimes the answer changes us before we even understand what happened.

Maybe we have misunderstood what an answer is supposed to look like.

Perhaps an answer does not always close a question.

Perhaps sometimes it opens a deeper one.

That thought has stayed with me.

Because if God is infinite and we are not, then perhaps growing closer to Him should not make us feel as though we have finally figured Him out.

Perhaps it should make us more curious.

There is something wonderfully freeing about those words.

I don't know yet.

They leave room for discovery.

They protect us from pretending.

And they allow us to discover more about ourselves.

Because there is another surprising part of getting to know someone.

Sometimes the person in front of us becomes a mirror.

Not because they are responsible for defining us.

But because relationship brings things to the surface.

Maybe I discover how much reassurance I need.

Maybe I discover how quickly I become afraid of rejection.

Maybe I discover that I want to control things when I feel uncertain.

Maybe I discover that I can love more deeply than I believed possible.

The other person did not necessarily create these things in me.

They may simply have made them visible.

And suddenly, while I thought I was learning about someone else, I was also learning about myself.

Perhaps that is one of the gifts of relationship.

It reveals us.

Not always comfortably.

But often honestly.

And perhaps this is another reason why we need to be careful about deciding that someone else is the problem.

Sometimes the relationship is showing me something that belongs to me.

Sometimes two people simply bring two different histories, needs, and ways of seeing the world into the same relationship.

That doesn't make either person wrong.

It makes them human.

And perhaps that is where need shows its place in the design.

We need the other not to complete us in the way a missing piece completes a puzzle, but to reveal us in a way we cannot reveal ourselves alone.

And perhaps the question is not:

"Who is the problem?"

but:

"What are we discovering?"

That is a very different question.

It moves us away from blame and toward curiosity.

And perhaps that is what God does with us.

He already knows our failures.

He already knows the places where we are still growing.

And yet His invitation is not simply:

“Look at everything you have done wrong.”

It is:

Come closer.

Learn.

Grow.

Return.

Become.

Perhaps He is less interested in humiliating us with what we have been than in revealing who we can become.

And maybe we can learn to love people in the same way.

Not by pretending they have no flaws.

But by refusing to believe that the worst thing we have discovered about them is the whole truth about who they are.

There is always more.

Another story.

Another reason.

Another hope.

And perhaps that is why love requires curiosity.

Because the moment I decide that I have completely figured you out, I have

stopped meeting you. I am meeting my conclusion about you.

But if I remain curious, something remains alive.

I can still ask:

Who are you today?

What has changed?

What do you need that you didn't need before?

And perhaps, one day, I can ask an even deeper question:

"Is there something about you that you wish I understood better?"

That question requires humility.

Because I may hear an answer I did not expect.

But perhaps that is the point.

If I really want to know you, I have to be willing to discover that there is more to know.

Maybe we are not finished.

Maybe neither of us is supposed to be.

Perhaps God is still writing.

And perhaps relationship is one of the places where we get to watch that writing happen.

Not by guessing the next sentence.

But by staying close enough to read it as it unfolds.

And perhaps that is what it means to love a person deeply:

Not to say,

“I know exactly who you are.”

But to say:

“I know some of who you are. And I would still like to know more.”

Chapter Eight

What We Bring With Us

Perhaps there is another reason relationships can become so complicated.

We do not enter them empty-handed.

We bring ourselves.

And we bring everything that has shaped us.

The way we were loved.

The way we were not loved.

The things that were said to us.

The things that were never said.

The promises that were kept.

The promises that were broken.

The moments when we felt safe.

The moments when we learned that safety could disappear.

We bring our experiences with us, often without realizing how much they are still influencing the way we see another person.

Sometimes we meet someone in the present, but we respond to them as though we were still standing in the past.

Someone becomes quiet, and suddenly an old fear wakes up.

Someone needs space, and we hear abandonment.

Someone asks for reassurance, and we hear accusation.

Someone loves us, and we don’t quite know how to receive it because love has not always felt safe.

The other person may be standing in front of us.

But sometimes our history is standing there too.

And this is where things become complicated.

Because our past is real.

We should not pretend it isn’t.

It has shaped us.

Sometimes it has protected us.

A person who learned early that people can disappear may become very attentive to changes in someone else’s behavior.

A person who learned that love had to be earned may become exceptionally good at giving.

A person who learned not to depend on anyone may become extraordinarily independent.

A person who learned that conflict was dangerous may become very good at keeping the peace.

These responses may once have helped us survive something.

But what helped us survive one season of our lives may not always help us build the relationship we want now.

And perhaps this is where the past needs to be treated with both compassion and honesty.

We don’t have to hate the person we became.

We don’t have to be ashamed of the ways we learned to protect ourselves.

But we also don’t have to let those old strategies decide everything about our future.

Perhaps the question is not:

“Why am I like this?”

but:

“What did I learn, and is it still true?”

That is a very different question.

Because we often carry beliefs about love that we have never consciously examined.

Maybe we learned:

If someone loves me, they will always know what I need.

If I have to ask, it doesn’t count.

If someone really loves me, they will never need space.

If I am not useful, I am not valuable.

If I let someone see how much I need them, they will have power over me.

And we can live according to these beliefs for years without ever asking where they came from.

Until a relationship brings them into the light.

These are not truths about who we are. They are things we learned. And perhaps one of the most painful things we learned was to be ashamed of our own need — as if needing were a flaw in the design, when it was always part of the design.

Then something happens.

We begin to notice.

And perhaps that is another gift relationship can give us.

It can show us the beliefs we have been carrying without knowing that we were carrying them.

The other person does not necessarily cause the problem.

Sometimes they simply touch the place where the problem was already waiting.

That can be uncomfortable.

But it can also be an invitation.

Because once we see something, we can begin to ask whether we still want to live according to it.

And this brings us back to God.

What if some of the things we learned about love were simply wrong?

What if we learned them from people who were themselves wounded?

Then perhaps we need another source.

If we want to know what love looks like, perhaps we need to ask the One who created it.

Not because every human relationship can simply be copied from our understanding of God's relationship with us.

But because God gives us a different reference point.

He asks us to forgive.

To tell the truth.

To love our neighbor.

To seek reconciliation.

To leave room for freedom.

To love without pretending that love means approving everything.

These are not merely religious instructions.

They begin to form a different understanding of what a relationship could be.

And perhaps one of the most important things we discover is this:

We are not required to repeat everything we have inherited.

We can examine it.

We can question it.

We can keep what is good.

We can let go of what is destructive.

We can learn something new.

That is a profoundly hopeful thought.

Because it means our history does not have to become our destiny.

The fact that I learned one way of loving does not mean it is the only way I can love.

The fact that I learned to protect myself does not mean I can never learn to trust.

The fact that I learned to guess does not mean I can never learn to ask.

Perhaps this is part of what it means to become a new person without rejecting the person we used to be.

We can look back and say:

I understand why you learned that.

And then:

But you don't have to live there forever.

There is something else we need to remember.

The person we love has a history too.

They are carrying things we may never fully see.

That does not excuse harmful behavior.

But it does mean that perhaps we should be slower to reduce a person to their reaction.

There may be a story underneath it.

And if we are curious enough to ask, we may discover it.

Sometimes the question is as simple as:

“What happened for you just now?”

Not:

“Why are you being like this?”

But:

“What happened for you?”

That question leaves room.

It doesn’t excuse.

It doesn’t accuse.

It invites understanding.

And perhaps sometimes the answer will be:

“I don’t know.”

That’s okay too.

We do not always have immediate access to the reasons behind our own reactions.

Sometimes we need time.

Sometimes we need prayer.

Sometimes we simply need another person who is willing to remain patient while we figure it out.

And perhaps this is another way we can reflect God's relationship with us.

He knows what we bring with us.

He knows the parts of our story we understand and the parts we don't.

He knows what formed us.

And yet He continues to meet us in the present.

He does not ask us to become completely different people before we are allowed to approach Him.

He meets us where we are.

But He does not necessarily leave us there.

There is movement.

An invitation.

A possibility of becoming.

Perhaps that is what grace does.

It does not say:

“Nothing needs to change.”

It says:

“You don’t have to change everything before you can begin.”

And maybe that is important in human relationships too.

We do not have to arrive perfectly healed, perfectly wise, perfectly secure.

If that were the requirement, none of us would ever begin.

We begin with what we have.

We tell the truth about where we are.

We learn.

We make mistakes.

We repair.

We try again.

Perhaps the greatest danger is not having wounds.

It is being unaware of them.

Because what we don't recognize, we are likely to repeat.

But what we can see, we can begin to question.

And what we can question, we can begin to change.

This is why self-knowledge matters so much in love.

If I do not know what I carry, I may hand it to you and call it yours.

If I do not know what I fear, I may accuse you of causing my fear.

If I do not know what I learned about love, I may mistake my learned patterns for truth.

Perhaps one of the most loving things we can do for another person is therefore to become more honest about ourselves.

Not so that we can become perfect.

But so that we can take responsibility for what belongs to us.

This is mine.

That is yours.

This fear comes from my past.

This need is real, but you are not responsible for everything I feel.

There is freedom in being able to say those things.

Because when I take responsibility for myself, I no longer need to make you responsible for me.

Suddenly there is room for two people.

Two histories.

Two imperfect human beings.

And perhaps God in the middle of it all.

Not as someone we use to avoid difficult conversations.

But as the One we can keep asking:

What is mine to carry?

What is theirs to carry?

What are you asking me to learn here?

Maybe those questions will not always produce immediate answers.

But perhaps they will keep us awake.

They will keep us curious.

And maybe that is another kind of freedom.

The freedom to realize:

I am not only what happened to me.

And you are not only what happened to you.

We are both still becoming.

And perhaps love is one of the places where that becoming becomes visible.

Where the past can be understood without being allowed to dictate the future.

Perhaps that is where healing begins.

Not with pretending that the past never happened.

But with discovering that it does not have to have the final word.

Chapter Nine

When Love Becomes a Mirror

There is something else we discover when we begin to love another person deeply.

We begin to see ourselves.

Not always the version of ourselves we would like to see.

Sometimes another person can reveal our generosity.
Our patience.
Our tenderness.
But they can also reveal our impatience.
Our fear.
Our need for control.
Our insecurity.
Our difficulty receiving.

And sometimes this can be confusing.
We may think we are learning something about the other person when, in fact, we are discovering something about ourselves.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons relationships can become such powerful places of growth.

They bring us into contact with another human being who does not behave exactly as we would.
Who does not think exactly as we think.
Who does not need exactly what we need.

And suddenly, our assumptions are challenged.

We thought our way was obvious.
It wasn't.

And now we have a choice.
We can insist:
“This is what love means.”
Or we can become curious:
“What does love mean to you?”

That question can change a relationship.

Because love is not only about what I intend to give.
It is also about what the other person actually receives.

I may think I am being helpful.
They may feel controlled.
I may think I am giving them space.
They may feel abandoned.
I may think I am showing love by solving a problem.
They may simply have wanted me to listen.

This is where the difference between intention and impact becomes important.

Good intentions matter.
But they are not the whole story.

If I truly care about another person, I need to become interested in how my actions affect them.
Not because I must become responsible for every feeling they have.
That would be impossible.
But because love makes me willing to listen.
And listening may change me.

Perhaps that is why Ask, Don't Guess has become so important in this journey.
Guessing is often an attempt to create certainty.
Asking requires humility.

When I guess, I get to remain in control of the story.
When I ask, I have to accept that I might be wrong.

And perhaps being willing to be wrong is one of the great acts of love.

It says:
“My interpretation is not more important than your reality.”

That does not mean that another person’s interpretation is automatically the truth either.
Two people can experience the same moment differently.
Both experiences can be real.

But if we never ask, we may spend years fighting against stories that were never true.

Perhaps we need to learn to say:
“This is what I thought was happening.
Is that what was happening for you?”

What a different conversation that creates.
There is room for correction.
Room for surprise.
Room for understanding.

And perhaps this is where loving another person teaches us something about loving ourselves.

Because if I discover that I was wrong,
I don’t have to collapse.
Being wrong does not mean being worthless.
It simply means I have discovered something I didn’t know before.

Maybe we have made mistakes so frightening because we have confused being wrong with being bad.

But learning requires being wrong sometimes.
A child learning to walk falls.
A person learning a language says things incorrectly.
A person learning to love will misunderstand sometimes.

The question is not whether mistakes will happen.
They will.
The question is what happens after them.

Can we return?
Can we say:
“I got that wrong.”
Can we say:
“I’m sorry.”
Can we say:
“Tell me what you experienced.”

Perhaps repair is one of the most underrated forms of love.

We often imagine that good relationships are relationships without conflict.
But maybe a good relationship is not one in which nothing ever breaks.
Maybe it is one in which two people learn how to repair what breaks.

That requires humility.
And humility is not humiliation.
Humility is simply the willingness to see reality more clearly than we saw it before.

Sometimes reality says:
I was wrong.
Sometimes:
You misunderstood me.
Sometimes:
This hurt you more than I realized.
Sometimes:
I was reacting to something that

happened long before you came into my life.

Love does not require us to avoid truth.
Quite the opposite.
Love needs truth.
But truth without love can become a weapon.
And love without truth can become avoidance.
Perhaps we need both.

Truth that does not humiliate.
Love that does not lie.
Boundaries that do not punish.
Forgiveness that does not pretend nothing happened.

Perhaps this is what happens when we begin to understand that relationships are not designed to make us comfortable all the time.

They are also places where we become more honest.

Sometimes another person will show us something we would never have discovered alone.
And sometimes we won't like what we see.

But perhaps we can learn to stay with the discovery long enough to ask:
"What is this showing me?"

Not:
"Whose fault is this?"
But:
"What is this showing me?"

Maybe it is showing me that I am afraid.
Maybe it is showing me that I need to learn to ask for reassurance.
Maybe it is showing me that I have confused independence with freedom.

Sometimes, another person doesn't simply reveal the parts of us that need attention. Sometimes they call out something beautiful that was already there.

There are people who seem to make us more ourselves.
Around them, we become more generous. More courageous. More playful. More honest.

They don't put those things into us. They simply seem to make it easier for them to come to the surface.

Perhaps that is because each person carries something the other does not. One carries a question the other has never asked. Another carries a courage the other has forgotten. We do not find ourselves alone. We find ourselves by way of the other.

And perhaps that is another kind of mirror.

Sometimes someone looks at us and helps us see a version of ourselves we had almost forgotten was there.

“I didn’t know I could be like this.”

Perhaps love can do that.
It can reveal not only our wounds, but also our gifts.
Not only what we have been, but what we might become.

And perhaps this is one of the most beautiful things two people can give each other:
the freedom and encouragement to become more fully who God created them to be.

The goal of loving someone is not to turn them into the person we think they should be. Perhaps it is to help

them become more fully the person God already sees.

And sometimes, perhaps, it shows us something even more surprising:

I was never the problem.

Not everything that went wrong was proof that something was fundamentally wrong with me.
Not every rejection meant I was unlovable.
Not every relationship that failed meant I had failed.

Sometimes two people simply cannot give each other what they need.
Sometimes timing is wrong.
Sometimes people are growing in different directions.
Sometimes a relationship reveals a lesson without being meant to last forever.

That can be painful.
But perhaps there is freedom in allowing a relationship to tell the truth about itself without turning that truth into a verdict about our worth.

And perhaps this is another place where God sees us differently than we often see ourselves.

We tend to make our failures permanent.
God sees a person who is still becoming.

We say:
“This is who I am.”
Perhaps God says:
“This is where you are.”

Those are not the same thing.
Where I am is not necessarily where I will remain.

And maybe that is why we need relationships.
Not because another person can complete us.
But because relationships can reveal things.

It can challenge us.
It can encourage us.
It can expose our blind spots.
It can show us strengths we didn't know we had.
It can give us opportunities to practice the very things we say we believe.

It can teach us to ask.
To listen.
To forgive.
To receive.
To let go.
To choose.

And perhaps, somewhere in all of that, we begin to recognize ourselves

more clearly.
Not the self we constructed to survive.
But the person God already sees.

Perhaps loving another person does not complete the journey of discovering ourselves.
Perhaps it simply gives us another mirror through which we can see a little more clearly.

And perhaps the deeper we go, the more we realize that the mirror was never the destination.
It was an invitation.

An invitation to ask the question beneath all the other questions:

“God, who did You create me to be?”

Chapter Ten

Maybe the Best in Us Was Already There

Perhaps a mirror does more than show us what is wrong.
Perhaps, sometimes, it shows us what was there all along.

We often think of relationships as places where we are changed.
Someone teaches us something.
Someone challenges us.

And when that happens, it is tempting to say, “ You made me this way.”

But there is another possibility.
Maybe the other person did not put something new into us at all. Maybe they simply gave something that was

already there enough room to emerge.

There is a difference between saying, “You made me this person,” and saying, “With you, I discovered this part of myself.”

The first can make the other person responsible for who we are. The second leaves both people free.

And perhaps that distinction matters more than we realize.

We spend much of our lives learning how to fit.

Be strong.
Be useful.
Don’t need too much.
Don’t disappoint people.

Long before we know how to ask who we really are, we learn what seems to be expected of us.
And slowly, sometimes without realizing it, we become very good at presenting the version of ourselves that seems safest.

This does not necessarily mean that anyone failed us. The people who shaped us were often simply giving us what they themselves had received.

But somewhere along the way, we can lose track of the difference between who we are and who we learned to be.

Perhaps that is one reason certain relationships affect us so deeply. Not because the other person knows everything about us, but because around them we don’t have to work

quite so hard to keep certain parts of ourselves hidden.

There are people who make us perform, and there are people around whom we forget to perform.
The difference can be difficult to explain.

Nothing dramatic has to happen. Someone may simply listen. They may take an idea seriously that we almost decided not to share. They may notice that we become more alive when we talk about something we love.

And sometimes, because someone else sees something in us, we begin to see it too.
We try something.
We speak more honestly.
We become less afraid of being seen.

Then we may wonder where that part of us came from.
Perhaps it did not come from anywhere. Perhaps it was waiting.

I think this is one of the quiet gifts of being known. Being known does not necessarily mean that someone knows everything about us. Sometimes it means that someone creates enough safety for us to know ourselves a little better.

That is different.
And perhaps it is one of the reasons love can transform us without controlling us.

Love does not have to say, “ I know who you should become.”
It can say,
“I see something in you.”
And then it can leave room.

Room for the other person to discover what that something is. Room for them to get it wrong. Room for them to surprise us.

Perhaps that is what freedom looks like inside a relationship.
Not distance. Not indifference. But room.
Room for two people to remain themselves while moving closer.

This also changes the way we think about encouragement.

We often imagine encouragement as telling someone what they are capable of. But sometimes the deepest encouragement is quieter. It is noticing something without claiming it.

I noticed that.
You seem really alive when you do

that.
I think this matters to you.

None of these sentences tells another person who they are. They simply offer a reflection. And then the other person gets to decide what to do with it.

That matters because the moment we become responsible for bringing out someone else's potential, love can quietly become control.
We start watching, measuring, pushing, waiting for results.

But perhaps that was never our role. Maybe our role is simply to love what we can see without demanding that the other person become it for us.

I wonder if this is also part of how God relates to us.

We often imagine God as the one who tells us what we need to become. And certainly, faith calls us forward.
But perhaps God does not begin with our deficiencies.
Perhaps He begins with what He already sees.

There are things about us we do not yet recognize. There are gifts we have dismissed. There are desires we have buried. There are parts of our character that have been hidden beneath fear, disappointment, or simply the exhaustion of trying to get through life.

And perhaps God's invitation is sometimes less, " Become someone else," and more,
"Come and see."

See what I placed in you.
See what happens when fear no

longer gets the final word.
See who you are when you are not trying to earn love.

God does not need to manufacture an identity for us. He already knows the person He created.
Perhaps part of our journey is learning to see what He sees.

And what does that mean for us?
Perhaps it means becoming a little more careful with the way we speak to ourselves.

We can spend years trying to repair ourselves without ever asking whether we have correctly identified the thing that needs repairing.

Maybe I am not lazy. Maybe I am exhausted.
Maybe I am not difficult. Maybe I have learned to silence myself until I finally

can’t.
Maybe I am not too sensitive. Maybe I notice things other people overlook. Maybe I am not needy. Maybe I was created for connection.

None of this means that we never need to change. Sometimes we do. But growth becomes very different when it begins with curiosity rather than condemnation.

Instead of asking only, “ What’s wrong with me?” perhaps we can begin asking,
“What’s actually here?”

And then another question becomes possible:
“What have I never given enough room to become?”

Maybe this is why the people who love us can sometimes become

mirrors.
They show us things we could not see alone.
Not only our wounds.
Our strengths, too.
Not only the places where we need to grow, but the places where we have already grown.

A person might remind us that we are creative. Another might remind us that we are brave. Someone else might awaken our sense of humor. Someone might make us want to pray again.

Perhaps none of those things were created by the relationship.
Perhaps the relationship simply became the place where they could breathe.

That changes the way we understand what we do for one another.

We do not have to create the best in someone else.
We do not have to rescue it.
Sometimes we simply make room.
And making room is an act of love.

It is also an act of trust.
Because if I truly love you, I have to allow for the possibility that who you become may not be exactly who I imagined.

You may discover new interests.
You may learn to say no.
You may take a different path.

That can be frightening, especially when we have confused closeness with sameness.
But love cannot mean, “ I want you to become more yourself — as long as the person you become still fits comfortably into my expectations.”

Real love leaves room for surprise.

There is another freedom hidden here, too.
If another person can help me discover something that was already in me, then I do not have to make them responsible for keeping it alive.

I can carry what I discovered with me.
The courage is mine.
The creativity is mine.
The voice is mine.
The tenderness is mine.

And I can still be grateful that someone helped me recognize those things.

That is not less intimate. It may actually be more.
Because gratitude does not have to become dependence.

Perhaps this is one of the deepest forms of friendship: not knowing everything about another person, not having an answer for every problem, but being someone around whom they can become more honest, more alive, more themselves.

And perhaps the greatest gift is not to say, “ I know who you are.”
Maybe it is to say,

“I want to keep discovering who you are.”

There is a difference.
The first closes the door.
The second leaves it open.

And maybe that is why we have to keep asking.
Not because we know nothing about the people we love, but because

knowing someone is never the same as having finished discovering them.

The same is true of ourselves.
We are not finished.
The person I think I know may still surprise me.

And perhaps that is not a problem to solve.
Perhaps it is part of the gift.

Because if I believe I already know exactly who you are, I no longer have to listen.

But what if there is more?

What if some part of you is still waiting for room?
What if some part of me is still waiting for room?
What if becoming more fully ourselves is not about constructing a better version of who we are, but about

making enough room for what is already there?

Perhaps we can simply begin by asking:

“What in me has been waiting for permission to live?”

And then we can listen.

Because maybe the best in us was already there.
Maybe it did not need to be created.
Maybe it only needed room.

And perhaps one of the most beautiful things we can ever do for another human being is to become a place where something good can emerge — not because we made it happen, but because, for a little while, love made it safe enough to be seen.

And perhaps that is enough.

PHASE IV — SEEKING

Chapter Eleven

"I want to know what love is. Can you tell me?"

Sometimes a question enters our lives quietly. It does not announce that it is going to change anything. It simply stays with us.

For me, that question came through a song: **I Want to Know What Love Is**

I had heard the song before. But at some point, I stopped hearing it simply as a song and started hearing the question inside it.

What if I really want to know what love is?

And then another thought came, a much more unsettling one: What if I don't actually know?

Not in the abstract. Not what the word means, but what it actually looks like when two human beings are trying to live it.

What does love do?
How does love behave when it is disappointed?
What does it do with freedom, with fear, with wanting something very badly? And what does it do with need – mine and yours?

Those questions felt different. They were not asking me to find a definition. They were asking me to pay attention.

Because perhaps we can talk about love for years without ever noticing how it behaves.

We can call something love because it feels intense.
We can call something love because we cannot let go.
We can call something love because we need the other person so much that losing them feels unbearable.

But intensity is not necessarily love.
Need is not necessarily love.
Sacrifice is not necessarily love.
Even devotion can become something else when freedom disappears.

So how would I know?

Perhaps love can be recognized not only by what it feels like, but by what it makes possible.

Does it make room?
Does it allow another person to remain themselves?
Does it make honesty safer or more dangerous?
Does it leave space for a no?
Does it stay curious when it would be easier to assume?

And perhaps one of the most revealing questions is this:
What happens to love when it does not get what it wants?

There is another way we might recognize love. Perhaps real love does not become smaller as reality becomes clearer. It becomes deeper.

At first, we may love what we see. The way someone looks at us, the things we have in common, the possibilities we imagine.

But eventually we begin to see more. The fears, the contradictions, the habits that irritate us, the places where we are different.

And then something important happens. Sometimes what we thought was love begins to disappear. The more we know, the less we feel.

What we loved was perhaps not the person at all, but the picture we had created of them.

But perhaps there is another possibility. What if knowing someone more deeply does not make us love them less, but more?

What if every new layer we discover gives us another reason to understand them, to have compassion for them, to choose them — not because we have discovered that they are perfect,

but because we have discovered who they actually are?

That kind of love is different. It does not need the other person to remain ideal. It can survive reality. Perhaps even more than that: it becomes stronger because of reality.

The more I know you, the more I see you.
And the more I see you, the more freely I can choose you.
Not the person I imagined.
You.

And perhaps that is one of the quiet ways we recognize love.
It does not need less truth to survive.
It needs more.

That changes things. Because it is relatively easy to call something love when everything is going our way.

When the other person agrees, when they choose what we hoped they would choose.

But what happens when they don't? When they need something different from what we need, when they need space, when they say no?

Perhaps that is where we begin to see the difference between love and possession.

Possession says, if you love me, you will give me what I want.
Love has to be able to say, "I may not like your answer, but you are still free to give it."

That is a very different kind of love. And it is much harder.

Because freedom is beautiful when someone uses it to choose us. It is

much harder when they use it to choose something else.

Yet if love only works when the other person chooses what we want, then perhaps what we are protecting is not love at all. Perhaps we are protecting our own security.

That made me think again about the freedom we talked about earlier.

I am free. And I choose you.

Those words sound beautiful together, but they only mean something if both parts are real. If I am not free, my choice is not really a choice.

Love needs freedom because love wants a real yes. Not a yes produced by fear, not a yes produced by guilt.

A real yes.

And perhaps that is why love cannot simply be measured by how much someone is willing to give up.

Sometimes love gives.
Sometimes love stays.
Sometimes love lets go.
Sometimes love speaks.
Sometimes love becomes quiet.

The question is not always, how much did I sacrifice?
Perhaps the better question is: What did love make possible here? Did it make truth possible, freedom possible, forgiveness possible, growth possible? Did it make two people more themselves rather than less?

These questions don’t give us easy answers. And perhaps that is exactly why they are useful.

Because maybe love is not something we can define once and then stop thinking about. Maybe it is something we learn to recognize over time, like a language, like music.

At first, we hear only the melody. Then we begin to notice the harmony, then the pauses, then the places where one instrument answers another.

And eventually we realize that what makes the music beautiful is not that every instrument is playing the same thing. It is that they are listening to one another.

Perhaps relationships are like that too. Two people do not have to become one person in order to love each other well. They have to learn how to hear each other.

And that brings us to something we have already touched before, but perhaps now from a different direction.

We cannot hear someone we have already decided we understand.
If I think I know what you need, I don't have to ask.
If I think I know why you are quiet, I don't have to listen.

And suddenly, without intending to, I am no longer in a relationship with the person in front of me. I am in a relationship with my idea of them.

That is a subtle difference, and perhaps one of the most important discoveries in love is realizing how often we do this.

We fill in the blanks. We interpret, we predict, we remember what happened

last time and assume it will happen again.

We think we are understanding, but sometimes we are simply guessing very confidently.

Perhaps love asks for something more humble: **Stay curious.**

Not because you know nothing about the person you love, but because knowing someone is never the same as having finished knowing them.

People change, circumstances change, we change, and sometimes the person we have known for years will tell us something we have never heard before.

Do we defend the picture we already have, or do we allow the person in front of us to tell us who they are now?

Perhaps this is where love becomes a practice rather than an idea. We have to keep noticing, keep listening, keep allowing ourselves to be surprised.

And perhaps this is also where my question from the song became bigger.

I want to know what love is. Then how do I find out?

I cannot simply think my way into the answer. I have to watch, I have to listen, I have to experience. I have to ask, I have to seek.

Not because I already know what I will find on the other side, but because I want to know. Maybe wanting to know is where discovery begins.

And perhaps that is why I don't want this book to give you a definition of

love. A definition can be memorized. A relationship has to be lived.

I would rather leave you with questions that you can take into your own life.

When have you mistaken intensity for love?
When have you mistaken closeness for possession?
When have you mistaken knowing someone for knowing what they need?
When have you been afraid to ask because you were afraid of the answer?

And perhaps the question that matters most:
What would I do differently if I really wanted to know what love is?

I don’t know where that question will take you.
I don’t think I know where it will take me.
But perhaps we don’t need to know yet.

Perhaps we only need to be willing to follow it.

Because once a question like that has really taken hold of us, it becomes difficult to go back to pretending we already have the answer.

And maybe that is a good thing.

Perhaps the question is not the interruption of the journey. Maybe the question is what sets the next domino in motion. And perhaps seeking begins when we stop guessing at the answer and start asking for it.

Chapter Twelve

Ask

There is something surprisingly difficult about asking a question.

Not because we do not know how to form one. We ask questions all day long. We ask what time someone will arrive, what they would like for dinner.

But there is another kind of question. One that requires something more from us.
It is the question we ask when we realize that we do not actually know.

That sounds obvious. Yet so much of what happens between people begins with the opposite assumption. We think we know what the other person meant. We think we know why they reacted the

way they did. We think we know what they need.

Sometimes we are right. Sometimes we are not. But once we have decided that we already know, we stop asking.

Sometimes we even ask questions that are really statements in disguise.
You didn't mean that, did you?
You're not angry with me, are you?
They sound like questions, but often we already know which answer we want.

And perhaps that is why asking is harder than it sounds.

To ask is to surrender the illusion that I already know.

If I tell myself that I know what you need, I can act without involving you. I can decide what would be good for you. I can offer advice you did not ask for. I can even call it love.

But what if love is not only about what I am willing to give? **What if it is also about being willing to discover what is actually wanted?**

That requires humility.
Because asking means admitting that the person in front of me is not a puzzle I have already solved.

There is something beautiful about that. The other person remains a person. Not a collection of patterns I have learned to recognize. Not a role I have assigned to them.

There is still something I do not know. And perhaps that is not a problem to overcome.
Perhaps it is part of what makes knowing someone possible.

When I ask you a real question, I give you the opportunity to tell me who you are instead of forcing you to fit into the

picture I have already created. I allow you to surprise me. I allow you to disagree with my interpretation.

That can be uncomfortable.
It is much easier to love the person we think we understand than the person who has the freedom to tell us that we misunderstood them.

And perhaps this is where we often choose certainty over discovery. We like our explanations. They give us something solid to stand on, even when they are wrong. Sometimes we would rather have a wrong answer than an unanswered question, because an unanswered question leaves space. And space can be uncomfortable.

But if God relates to us this way, perhaps there is something here worth noticing. He does not seem threatened by our questions.

Scripture is full of people asking God why, how, when, and where. They question Him, argue with Him, cry out to Him.

And God does not seem to need us to pretend that we already understand Him.

So perhaps asking is not a sign that relationship is failing.
Perhaps asking is one of the ways relationship becomes real.

Because when I ask, I am no longer relating only to the version of you that exists in my head. I am making room for you to answer.

And that changes something.

It changes the way I listen, because I am no longer listening merely to confirm what I already believe.
It changes the way I respond, because I

have allowed information into the relationship that I did not have before. And sometimes it changes me, because the answer may reveal something I had never considered.

This is where asking becomes much more than a communication skill.
It becomes an act of surrender.

I surrender the certainty that I already know. I surrender the comfort of my own interpretation. I surrender the temptation to decide for another person what their experience must be.

I ask, and then I wait.

And perhaps that is the harder part. Because asking a question is still within my control. What comes back is not.

I may ask what someone needs and discover that it is not what I expected.

I may discover that their no is real. And that their freedom to say no is part of what makes their yes mean something. I may ask how they experienced something and hear an answer that challenges my entire understanding of what happened.

And suddenly the question becomes more difficult than the asking.

What do I do when the answer is not what I wanted to hear? Perhaps that is where seeking truly begins.

PHASE V — LISTENING

Chapter Thirteen

How Do I Ask?

Perhaps asking is only half of the work.

Because a question can open a door.
But it cannot decide what we do once the door is open.

We have spent a long time talking about asking instead of guessing.
But perhaps there is another distinction we need to make.

Not every question really opens a door.

Some questions close it.

They sound like questions.
They have a question mark at the end.
But underneath them, the answer has already been decided.

Why did you do that?
You don't really mean that, do you?
Why are you being so distant?

These may appear to invite an answer. But often they contain a judgment already.

They are not really saying:
Tell me what happened.
They are saying:
Explain why you did the thing I have already decided you did.

There is a difference.

A real question is not designed to get the answer I want. It is designed to discover the truth.

And that requires something from us.

Perhaps this is the difference between a question that closes and a question that opens.

A closing question says:
Why did you do that?

An opening question might say:
What was happening for you?

The first can make someone defend themselves.
The second gives them somewhere to begin.

The difference is often in the attitude behind it.

Am I asking because I want to understand?
Or am I asking because I want you to admit that my interpretation was correct?

Those can sound almost identical.
But they are not the same question.

Consider another example.
Someone becomes quiet.

We might say:
You obviously want to be left alone.

It sounds like we are respecting their need for space.
But we have already decided what their silence means.

Perhaps they are tired.
Perhaps they are hurt.
Perhaps they want us to stay.
Perhaps they don't know what they need yet.

We don't know.

So we could ask:
Do you need some space?

And even that question leaves room for an answer we may not expect.

Maybe the answer is yes.
Maybe it is no.
Maybe it is:
I don't know.

And suddenly we are no longer managing the situation from our own assumptions.
We are listening.

Here is another one.

Instead of:
You're angry with me.

We might ask:
Did something I said hurt you?

Instead of:
You don't want to talk about it.

We might ask:
Do you want to talk about what happened?

Instead of:
You don't need me.

We might ask:
What do you need from me right now?

The difference is subtle.
But perhaps love often lives in subtle differences.

A sentence can leave someone with nowhere to go.
Or it can give them room to speak.

And perhaps this is why asking requires humility.

If I say:
I think I know what happened. Tell me if I'm wrong.

I have already left a door open.
I am offering my interpretation without turning it into a verdict.

That little sentence — Tell me if I'm wrong — may be one of the most freeing things we can say to another person.
Because it tells them that correcting us is allowed.

And perhaps people need that permission more often than we realize.

Sometimes we are afraid to correct someone because we know what will happen next.
They will explain.
They will defend themselves.
They will tell us why our experience isn't reasonable.

And eventually we learn that telling the truth costs too much.

So we stop.
We say:
It's fine.
When it isn't.
We say:
Nothing.
When there is something.

And the relationship may remain peaceful for a while.
But peace built on silence is not

necessarily peace.
Sometimes it is simply the absence of truth.

Perhaps this is why the way we ask matters so much.
If I want you to tell me the truth, I have to make room for an answer that might change my understanding.

I have to be willing to hear:
That's not what I meant.
Or:
Actually, I was hurt.
Or even:
Yes. I do need some space.

And I have to resist the temptation to immediately make the answer about me.

Because sometimes someone telling me what they need is not an accusation.
It is simply information.

That may be one of the hardest things to learn.

We hear:
I need some time alone.
And our mind translates it into:
You don't want me.

Someone says:
I experienced that differently.
And we hear:
You think I'm wrong.

But perhaps the other person did not say any of those things.
Perhaps we added them.

And there we are again.
Guessing.
Only this time, we are guessing about the meaning of an honest answer.

Maybe even asking is not enough.
Maybe we have to keep asking ourselves:

What did they actually say?

Not:
What did I fear they meant?
Not:
What does this remind me of?
Not:
What does this mean about me?

Just:
What did they actually say?

There is freedom in that too.
Because when we stop filling in the blanks, we give the other person back their own words.
We let them mean what they meant.

And perhaps, if we are unsure, we can ask again.

When you said that, what did you mean?

Not as a challenge.
As an invitation.

Because sometimes the most loving thing we can say is simply:

Help me understand.

Those three words contain something beautiful.
They do not say:
Convince me.
They do not say:
Agree with me.
They say:

There is something here I don't understand yet. And I am willing to come closer.

Perhaps that is what an open question really does.

It does not demand that the other person step into our understanding. It gives us the opportunity to step into theirs. Perhaps that is why we need

each other – one carries a question the other has never learned to ask.

And maybe that is why asking can become an act of love.

Not because we always ask the perfect question.
We won't.
Not because we will never make assumptions again.
We will.

But because we become willing to notice when we are guessing.
And then to stop.

To turn toward the person in front of us.

And say:

Tell me.
I want to understand.

Chapter Fourteen

Can I Hear the Answer?

Perhaps this is where asking becomes difficult.

Because sometimes we finally ask the question.
We leave the door open.
We say:
Tell me. I want to understand.

And then the other person tells us.

And suddenly, we discover that understanding was not the hardest part.
Hearing was.

Imagine asking someone:
“How did you experience yesterday evening?”

And they answer:
“Honestly? I felt alone.”

There is a moment.
Perhaps only a second.
But inside that second, so many things can happen.

But I was there.
I spent the whole evening with you.
What else was I supposed to do?

All of those thoughts may be true.
But they are not the answer to the answer.

The other person just told you something about their experience.
They felt alone.

And perhaps the first thing love asks of us is not to explain ourselves.
Perhaps it asks us to stay.

To resist the instinct to defend our intentions before we have understood their experience.

We may want to say:
“But I was trying to be there for you.”

And perhaps that is true.
But the other person is not necessarily saying that you did not try.
They are telling you what it felt like.

There is a difference between:
I did not intend to hurt you.
and:
You were not hurt.

The first may be true.
The second does not automatically follow.

This is where listening becomes more difficult than asking.
Because asking allows us to feel generous.
We can tell ourselves:
I am open.

But then the answer arrives.
And suddenly the truth has consequences.

Now I have to decide whether I really meant what I said.
Did I really want to know?
Or did I want to know as long as the answer did not disturb my understanding of myself?

Perhaps we have all done this.

We ask:
“How did that make you feel?”
And when the answer comes, we explain why they shouldn’t have felt that way.

We ask:
“What do you need from me?”
And when they tell us, we explain why what they need is difficult.

We ask:
“Are you okay?”
And when they say no, we become uncomfortable because now something has to happen.

Perhaps this is why listening is an act of love.
Because listening means allowing another person’s reality to exist in the room without immediately trying to change it.

It does not mean agreeing with everything.
It does not mean that one person’s experience automatically settles the question of what happened.
Two people can experience the same moment differently.

But if I love you, I want to know how it was for you.
Not because your experience erases

mine.
Because your experience belongs to you.

And perhaps that is the first thing we need to learn:

Asking creates freedom. Listening protects it.

If I invite you to speak and then punish you for what you say, I have not really given you freedom.
I have given you a test.

There was a correct answer.
You simply didn't know what it was.

And eventually, people learn.
They learn which subjects are safe.
Which feelings will be welcomed.
Which answers will cause an argument.

And so they become careful.
They edit.

They soften.
They say less.

Not necessarily because they want to hide.
Sometimes because they have learned that honesty has a price.

Perhaps that is one of the saddest things that can happen between two people who love each other.
Not that they stop caring.
But that they stop telling the truth because they no longer believe the truth is safe.

And perhaps we need to ask ourselves something uncomfortable.

What happens when someone tells me something I don’t like?

Do I become curious?
Or defensive?
Do I ask another question?

Or do I begin building my case?
Do I listen for understanding?
Or do I listen for the moment when I can finally explain myself?

There is a subtle difference between listening to understand and listening to respond.
When I listen to respond, I am already preparing my answer.
When I listen to understand, I am still discovering what I think.

Perhaps that is why real listening can feel vulnerable.
I may begin the conversation believing one thing.
And I may not believe exactly the same thing when it ends.

And that requires another kind of freedom.
The freedom to be changed by what I hear.

Perhaps this is also part of what it means to love someone as a real person. If I have already decided who you are, your answers are only evidence for a conclusion I have already reached.

But if I remain curious, your answer can actually teach me something.
You can surprise me.
You can correct me.

And perhaps saying:
“I didn’t know that.”
is sometimes more loving than saying:
“I understand.”

Because sometimes we don’t understand yet.
Sometimes all we can honestly say is:
“Thank you for telling me.”
Or:
“I need a moment to take that in.”
Or simply:
“Tell me more.”

Those sentences do not solve anything.
But they keep the door open.

And perhaps not every conversation needs to be solved immediately.
Sometimes the first act of love is simply refusing to close the door again.

Because once someone has taken the risk of telling us the truth, they are watching what we do with it.

Do we use it against them later?
Do we dismiss it?
Do we hold it carefully?

Perhaps intimacy is not only about how much we are willing to reveal.
It is also about how carefully we hold what has been revealed to us.

And maybe that is why listening is more than hearing words.
It is receiving another person’s reality

without immediately making it about our own.

It is saying:
You don’t have to make your experience easier for me before I am willing to hear it.

And perhaps this is where asking finally becomes what we hoped it would be.

Not a way to control the answer.
Not a way to secure the relationship.
But a way to meet another person in the truth.

I ask.
You answer.
I listen.

And perhaps, for a moment, neither of us has to be right.
We simply have to be real.

And maybe that is where something deeper becomes possible.

Because when I know that you can tell me the truth, I become freer to tell you mine.

And when you know that I will listen, you no longer have to protect me from your reality.

Perhaps that is how two people begin to stop performing. Not because they finally agree. But because they finally feel safe enough to be known. Perhaps that is what it means when we say we find ourselves by way of the other – we become more ourselves because truth has finally become safe.

And maybe this is the next question we have to ask ourselves:

Can I hear the answer when it is not the answer I wanted?

PHASE VI— KNOWING THE HEART

Chapter Fifteen

I Know Your Heart

Perhaps there is another side to knowing someone.

We have spoken about how quickly we assume we know.
How much of our own history we bring into a moment.
How easily we mistake a reaction for a person.

And all of that is true.

But there is also this.

When you have walked with someone for a long time, something else begins to happen.

You begin to know their heart.

Not just their moods.
Not just their words in a difficult moment.
But the direction of their life.
What they care about when no one is watching.
How they are when they are not tired, not pressured, not afraid.

You begin to know who they are, not just how they sometimes act.

And perhaps that changes everything.

Because sometimes the person who is closest to us gets the worst of us.

Not because we love them less.
But because they are the safest place to be human.

We had a bad day.
Something else weighed on us.
We were tired, or overwhelmed, or hurt

by something that had nothing to do with them.

And then they get the sharp word.
The short answer.
The sigh that was meant for something else entirely.

We all know this.

We have all been the one who gave it.
And we have all been the one who received it.

And in that moment, something in us wants to take that one moment and make it the whole truth.

You always.
You never.
You are.

One sentence becomes an identity.
One reaction becomes a verdict.
One moment becomes a story about who the other person is.

But perhaps love learns to pause there.

Perhaps love says:

Wait.

I know your heart.
And this is not your heart.

There is a difference between what happened in this moment and who you are.

A moment is not a person.
A reaction is not an identity.
A mistake is not a heart.

When you know someone's heart, you don't have to weigh every word.

You can still say:

That hurt me.
That was not okay for me.

You can be honest about what happened.

But you do not have to turn a bad moment into a bad person.

You can hold both.

This moment was difficult.
And I know who you are beyond this moment.

That is not excusing.

Excusing would say: It does not matter.

Knowing says: It matters. And it is not the whole truth.

Perhaps this is why knowing someone deeply makes it easier to find each other again after a fight.

Because we are no longer fighting about whether the other person is good or bad.

We know they are good.

We are only talking about what happened in this one moment.

And that is a much smaller, much more honest conversation.

It allows us to step back.

To say:

I had a bad day.
That came out wrong.
That was not meant for you.

And it allows the other to hear it.

Because they already know your heart too.

They know that this harsh word does not line up with everything else they have seen in you.

They know how you have shown up before.
How you have cared before.

Who you have been when it was not difficult.

And so they can let the moment be a moment.

Not everything has to become evidence.
Not every slip has to become a story.

Sometimes a slip is just a slip.

And perhaps this is one of the quiet gifts of a long love.

You become less easily offended.

Not because you care less.
But because you know more.

You know what to hold on to.
And you know what you can let pass.

You know when to say:

We need to talk about this.

And when to say:

I know you.
I know you didn’t mean it like that.
It’s okay.

Both require wisdom.

Both require knowing.

And maybe that is what happens when we truly know someone’s heart.

We stop weighing every word as if it could decide everything.

We start trusting the direction more than the moment.

We start trusting the heart more than the slip.

And suddenly, it becomes easier to come back to each other.

Because we never really left.

We were just having a difficult moment.

But our hearts knew the way back the whole time.

Perhaps this is what happens when two people are seen by the same Maker. They begin to recognize each other's hearts because they have both been seen first. And perhaps that is why they find their way back — not because they never lose each other, but because their hearts were known long before they knew each other.

PHASE VII — NEEDING

Chapter Sixteen

I Need You

But our hearts knew the way back the whole time. Perhaps that is where we are now.

We have learned how to ask.
We have learned how to listen.
We have learned to distinguish a moment from a heart.

And perhaps because of that, something else becomes possible.

We can stay.

Not because we have to.
Not because we are afraid to leave.
Not because we need to prove something.

But because we know where we are.
And we know with whom we are.

And perhaps when staying becomes possible, another sentence becomes possible too.

A sentence we may have been afraid to say.

Perhaps there is something we have been afraid to say.

I need you.

For a long time, that sentence may have sounded like weakness.

Like losing freedom.
Like admitting that we are not enough on our own.
Like giving someone else power over us.

Perhaps we learned to say instead:

I am fine.
I can handle it.
I don’t want to be a burden.

And perhaps we meant it.

But perhaps we also meant something else.

Perhaps we were afraid that if we say I need you, the other person will feel pressured.
Or that they will turn away.
Or that they will use it against us.

Perhaps we were afraid that needing someone would make us less free.

But perhaps we have it backwards.

Perhaps needing someone is not the opposite of freedom.

Perhaps it is what freedom makes possible.

Think about it.

Only someone who is free can truly say I need you.

Someone who is not free says I need you because they have no choice.

Because they are empty.
Because they are afraid.

But someone who is free says I need you differently.

They say:

I am free.
I have a life.
I could walk away.

And I don’t want to.

I want to walk toward you.

I need you, not because I cannot live without you, but because I do not want to live as if you do not matter.

Perhaps that is what it means that we are made by One Maker – we were never meant to prove we can live without each other.

There is a difference between needing someone to complete you and needing someone because they have become part of your life.

The first says: I am not enough.
The second says: My life is more with you.

Perhaps this is what we have been learning all along.

In the beginning, we thought freedom meant not needing anyone.

I am free, so I don't need you.

But now we are in a different place.

I am free, and I need you.

Not as a contradiction.
As a consequence.

Because I know your heart, I can stay.
And because I can stay, I can let you matter.

I can let you matter enough that your absence would be felt.
That your presence changes my day.
That your voice makes a difference.

That is not weakness.

That is allowing another person to be important.

Perhaps we have been afraid to need because we thought needing meant losing ourselves.

But perhaps the opposite is true.

When I say I need you, I am not saying I have lost myself.

I am saying I have found something worth needing.

I have found a person whose heart I know.
Whose direction I trust.
Whose presence I have come to rely on,

not because I must, but because I want to.

And perhaps that is a different kind of need.

Not a need that demands.
But a need that invites.

Not: You have to be here.
But: I want you here.

Not: I cannot be okay without you.
But: I am more okay when you are here.

Perhaps there is freedom in that too.

The freedom to not pretend.

To not pretend that we are islands.
To not pretend that we do not get lonely, or tired, or overwhelmed.

To simply say:

I need you today.

Can you be with me for a moment?

Can you listen?
Can you stay?

And perhaps when we can say that, the other person finally feels what we have been trying to say all along.

Not: I want to control you.
But: You matter to me.

Perhaps this is where freedom leads us.

Not away from each other.
But toward each other.

Not to a love that says:

I will never need you.

But to a love that can say:

I am free.
And I need you.
And I want you to need me too.

Not because we are weak.

But because we have finally learned that needing is not the opposite of love.

Perhaps it is love itself.

PHASE VIII — MUTUALITY

Chapter Seventeen

You Need Me Too

After saying, “I need you,” something changes. For a long time we thought need was something that belonged to one side at a time. I am the one who needs. Or you are. Someone is strong. Someone is not. Someone reaches. Someone is reached. But what if that picture was never true?

I am free. And I need you.

That was Chapter Sixteen. That was already a step. To admit that freedom does not mean I need no one. That I can stand on my own and still say, with honesty, “I want you here. Your life matters to mine.”

What we did not yet ask is what happens on the other side.

What if you need me too?

At first, that thought can feel strange. When we love someone, we often want them to be okay. We want them to be strong. We do not want to imagine that they might need us in the way we need them. We tell ourselves they are more independent. More together. Less affected. And sometimes we tell ourselves that because it feels safer. If you do not need me, then I cannot disappoint you. If you do not need me, then I cannot let you down. If you do not need me, then your wellbeing does not have anything to do with how I show up.

But that safety comes at a price. It keeps you at a distance.

To say “You need me too” is not to say “You are weak.” It is to say “You are human.”

It means you, too, have moments when you feel alone. You, too, have moments when my presence makes a difference. You, too, have moments when my absence leaves a space. It means the freedom we have been talking about is not only mine. You are free as well. And you, being free, have come to a similar place: You have let my life matter to yours.

That is not co-dependency. Co-dependency says: I am responsible for keeping you okay. Mutuality says: I am willing to acknowledge that I affect you, and that you affect me.

There is a quiet humility in realizing that someone else needs us. Not the kind of importance that puffs us up, but the kind that makes us gentle. Because if you need me too, then I cannot pretend that how I speak to you does not matter. I cannot pretend that whether I

listen or not matters little. I cannot pretend that whether I stay in the room, whether I keep my heart open, whether I ask and really hear, is irrelevant.

It matters.

Not because you are fragile. Because you have allowed me to matter.

And perhaps that is the most tender part of love. Not only that I am allowed to need. But that you are allowed to need as well.

We often think it is hard to say, “I need you.” But sometimes it is just as hard to hear, “I need you,” and to believe it is not a burden being placed on us, but a trust being given to us.

You needing me does not make you less free. It means you have used your freedom to let me matter.

For a long time, we thought love was about two independent people who happen to walk side by side and do not really need each other. But what if love is about two free people who have slowly learned that they do?

I need you.

That was the first discovery.

You need me too.

That is the second.

And it is a different kind of discovery. Because it is no longer only about my heart. Now your heart is in the room as well.

If you need me too, then we are no longer talking about one person's need. We are talking about something that belongs to both of us.

Perhaps that is why we were made by One Maker. Not so we could prove we don't need each other, but so we could finally stop pretending we don't.

Chapter Eighteen

We Need Each Other

But being needed can feel frightening as well as beautiful.

It can make us feel important. Loved. Chosen.

But it can also awaken an old fear: What if I am responsible for keeping you okay?

And that is where we have to make another distinction.

Someone needing me does not mean I have to carry them.

Someone needing me does not mean I have to fix them.

Someone needing me does not mean I am no longer free.

It can simply mean that I matter.

And perhaps that is the part we have not yet allowed ourselves to see.

Freedom does not mean that nobody needs me. It means I can be needed without being owned by someone else's need.

That changes the meaning of relationship.

I do not have to disappear into your need in order to answer it.

And you do not have to disappear into mine.

We can remain two people.

Two whole people.

Two free people.

And still need each other.

Maybe that is what makes the word we possible at all.

Not that we have become one person.

But that we have stopped pretending that our lives have nothing to do with each other.

Because the truth is, they do.

You affect me. I affect you.

What happens to you matters to me.

What happens to me matters to you.

Your joy can reach me.

Your pain can reach me.

Your absence can leave a space.

Your presence can change a room.

And none of that means we have lost ourselves.

It may mean we have finally allowed ourselves to belong to something larger than the isolated self we once thought freedom required.

Maybe we were never meant to be completely untouched by one another.

Maybe love was never supposed to make us independent of each other.

Maybe love teaches us something much more beautiful:

I can remain myself and still let your life matter to mine.

And perhaps this is where I need you becomes we need each other.

Not because we are incapable of standing alone.

But because standing alone was never the whole point.

There are things that can only exist between two people.

Comfort needs someone who can receive it.

Trust needs someone who can be trusted.

Forgiveness needs someone who can return.

Encouragement needs someone who is willing to keep going.

And sometimes, love itself needs two people who are willing to admit:

I cannot do this relationship alone.

Not because I am weak.

Because relationship is, by its very nature, shared.

Up to now we have understood freedom as something that protects us from losing ourselves.

I am free, therefore I can choose you without disappearing.

That was necessary.

But freedom does not stop at the border of my own life.

Freedom is not only the ability to stand alone. Freedom is also the ability to let another person's life matter to mine without turning that mattering into a burden.

For a long time we thought we had only two options.

Either I am independent and nobody really needs me.

Or I am needed, and therefore I am no longer free.

But love shows us a third way.

There is a difference between being responsible for someone and being responsible to someone.

Being responsible for you would mean I have to keep you okay.

I have to fix what hurts.

I have to make sure you never feel alone.

No one can carry that.

And love was never meant to ask for it.

Being responsible to you means something else.

It means I allow your life to reach me.

I do not look away when you say, “I need you.”

I do not immediately turn it into a problem to be solved.

I let it mean what it most simply means:

I have become part of your life.

And you have become part of mine.

That is why we is such a vulnerable word.

When I say I need you, I am speaking for myself.

When you say you need me too, you give me something I did not have to earn.

But when we say we need each other, we admit something neither of us can control anymore.

My life is no longer entirely mine in the way it was before.

Not because I have lost myself.

Because I have let you matter.

And perhaps that is what God has been showing us from the beginning.

He does not need us because He is incomplete without us.

And yet He lets us matter to Him.

He listens.

He responds.

He makes space for our lives to affect His heart, without ceasing to be Himself.

He is free. And He lets us matter.

Perhaps that is why we were made by One Maker who is Himself free and yet lets us matter — so we could learn to do the same for each other.

PHASE IX — REPAIR

Chapter Nineteen

Receiving

And if it is true that we need each other, then I have to learn how to receive that I am needed.

That sentence is easy to write. It is harder to live.

We have learned to say, “I need you.” We have learned to hear, “You need me too.” We have even begun to say, “We need each other,” without turning it into something heavy.

But now something quieter and more difficult is asked of us.

Can I let your needing me touch me?

Can I receive that I matter to you without explaining it away?

There are moments when someone says to us, without drama, almost in passing:

“It helped that you were there.”

“I thought about what you said.”

“I missed you yesterday.”

“It is good to hear your voice.”

And we hear the words. We understand them. And yet something in us moves quickly past them.

We say, “Oh, it was nothing.” We change the subject. We make a joke. We explain why we did not really do that much.

Why is it so difficult to simply let it land?

Perhaps because admitting that we need someone makes us vulnerable to the possibility that they might not be there.

But receiving that we are needed makes us vulnerable to the possibility that we actually matter.

And mattering is a strange thing to allow.

For a long time, many of us learned to be the one who gives. The one who understands. The one who listens. The one who is strong. It feels safer to be the one who needs less. The one who says, “I’m fine.”

To be needed disrupts that identity.

If I let your need reach me, then I am no longer just the observer of your life. I am part of it. My presence, my words, my absence, my return — they affect you.

That can feel like a lot.

Because what if I affect you badly?

What if I matter and then I fail you?

What if you count on me and I am tired, distracted, not at my best?

It is easier to say, “You don’t really need me that much,” than to stay in the discomfort of knowing that you do.

And yet love asks us to stay.

Not to become perfect. Not to become responsible for keeping the other person okay.

But to become willing to be touched by the fact that we are not irrelevant.

There is a difference between being needed as a role and being needed as a person.

A role can be replaced.

A person cannot.

When you say you need me, you are not saying, “I need someone to do something for me.”

You are saying, “I need you. Your particular presence. Your way of listening. Your way of seeing me. You.”

That is why receiving is so intimate.

To receive that I am needed is to let go of the idea that I am interchangeable.

And that goes against so much we have been taught. We have been taught to be humble, to not think too much of ourselves, to not take up too much space.

But there is a false humility that says, “I don’t matter that much.”

And there is a true humility that says, **“I matter, and I do not have to be afraid of mattering.”**

Maybe that is what God has been trying to show us all along.

He does not need us because He is empty without us.

He lets us matter to Him because love, when it is free, lets the other matter.

When He listens, it is not because He lacks information. It is because He has decided that our voice belongs in the room.

When He says, “I have called you by name,” He is not saying, “I need you to complete Me.”

He is saying, **“You are not interchangeable to Me.”**

Perhaps receiving works the same way between us.

I do not have to earn the fact that I matter to you.

I do not have to diminish it to be humble.

I can simply let it be true.

Your life is easier when I am kind.

Your heart is lighter when I am present.

And my life is different because you thought of me too.

That is not pride.

That is mutuality.

Love is not only learning how to need.

Love is learning how to let ourselves be needed without pulling away.

There is something healing about staying when someone lets us matter.

To not deflect.

To not say, “It was nothing.”

To simply say, **“I’m glad I could be there. It means a lot to me that it mattered.”**

That small staying can change everything.

Because when we can receive that we are needed, we begin to understand something that will become essential for what comes next.

If we matter to each other, then what we do to each other matters as well.

If your presence can bring comfort, then your absence can bring ache.

If your words can bring encouragement, then your words can also wound.

If we need each other, then we are no longer untouchable to one another.

And that is both the gift and the risk of everything we have discovered so far.

And if we need each other, then we will also, at some point, hurt each other.

Chapter Twenty

When We Hurt Each Other

And if we need each other, then we will also, at some point, hurt each other.

That sentence is not a warning. It is a recognition.

For as long as we could pretend that we did not really need each other, we could also pretend that we could not really hurt each other. If you do not matter that much to me, your words cannot reach me that deeply. If I do not matter that much to you, my absence cannot leave a real ache.

But once we have said, “We need each other,” once we have allowed ourselves to matter, we have also allowed something else to become true: **We have become touchable.**

And what is touchable can be wounded.

We do not hurt each other because love has failed. We hurt each other precisely because love has become real.

This is important to name, because many of us were taught that if love is real, it should not hurt. That if someone truly loves us, they will always know what to say, always be present, never be tired, never be distracted, never bring their own history into the room.

But that is not a person. That is an ideal.

A real person gets tired. A real person gets overwhelmed. A real person sometimes reacts from a place that has nothing to do with you, and everything to do with what they have carried for a long time. A real person sometimes wants to love you well and, in that very

moment, does not have the resources to do it.

That does not excuse the hurt. But it explains why it was never realistic to believe we would walk through love untouched.

The first hurt in a relationship that matters often comes as a surprise. We thought we were past that. We thought we had learned how to ask, how to listen, how to know each other's heart.

And then one evening happens. A tone. A word. A silence that lasts too long. A joke that lands wrong. A moment where one of us needed reassurance and the other needed space, and we both reached for different things at the same time.

"How did you experience yesterday evening?"

“Honestly? I felt alone.”

We remember that sentence from Chapter Fourteen. Now we are on the other side of it.

Now we are the one who hears: I felt alone.

And something in us wants to say immediately: That was not my intention. I did not mean it that way. You know I love you.

All of that can be true. And still, something else is also true.

I did not intend to hurt you is not the same as you were not hurt.

Intention matters. But intention alone does not undo impact.

This is where many conversations break. Not because we do not love each other, but because we try to defend our

intention before we have acknowledged the other person's experience.

Listening, which we talked about in Chapter Fourteen, becomes even harder here.

Asking creates freedom. Listening protects it. But staying when we have caused pain — that is what tests it.

Because when you tell me I hurt you, two things happen in me at once.

I feel sorrow that you were hurt.

And I feel fear that I am now the person who hurt you.

And it is the second feeling that often speaks first.

If I am afraid that a moment defines me, I will rush to explain why it was not that bad.

If I can remember what we learned in Chapter Fifteen, I can breathe differently.

A moment is not a person. A reaction is not an identity. A mistake is not a heart.

That is true for you. And it has to be true for me as well.

I can hurt you without being a bad person.

You can hurt me without being a bad person.

We can have a difficult moment without having a difficult heart.

That distinction does not make the hurt disappear. It makes it possible to look at it without having to destroy ourselves or each other in the process.

We hurt each other in different ways. Sometimes by what we say. Sometimes by what we do not say. Sometimes by coming too close when the other needed space. Sometimes by staying too far when the other needed closeness. Sometimes by carrying an old wound into a new moment and letting the old story decide what the new moment means.

None of that means we have stopped mattering to each other.

It may mean we have started to matter enough that our imperfections can no longer hide.

And perhaps that is where another old idea needs to be corrected.

We often think that good relationships have less conflict.

But maybe good relationships are not those where we hurt each other less. Maybe they are those where, when we do hurt each other, we do not immediately turn the hurt into a verdict about who we are.

Maybe love is not the absence of hurt. Maybe love is the presence of a way back.

For a long time we asked: How do we avoid hurting each other?

But after mutuality, the question has to change.

We will hurt each other. That much is certain, because we need each other.

And that decision — **to keep being true even when it hurts** — is where repair begins.

Because the question is no longer whether we will hurt each other.

The question is whether we can find a way back.

Chapter Twenty-One

Return

And when we have hurt each other, the question is no longer whether we hurt, but whether we can find a way back.

We often use the word forgiveness for that way back. But forgiveness is a word that has been used in so many ways that it almost no longer knows what it means.

For some, forgiveness means: It was not that bad. Let's pretend it did not happen.

For others, it means: I have to be okay again quickly, otherwise I am not a good or spiritual person.

For others still, it means: I will forgive you, but I will keep a quiet record of

what you did, so that next time I can prove who you really are.

None of that is return.

Pretending is not return.

Rushing is not return.

Keeping score is not return.

Return is something else. Something slower. Something more honest. Something we choose.

Because after we have hurt each other, there are really only two movements possible.

We can move away from each other. Physically, emotionally, spiritually. We can build a small, invisible wall and call it being mature. We can say, “It’s fine,” when it is not fine. We can learn to need each other a little less, to protect

ourselves from ever feeling that ache again.

Or we can move toward each other. Not because the hurt was not real, but because we are.

That movement toward is what the Bible has always called return more than forgiveness.

In Hebrew, the word is shuv. It does not mean to excuse. It means to turn. To turn back. To come back. To find your way back to where you belong.

Forgiveness is not about erasing what happened. Forgiveness is about refusing to let what happened be the end of us.

And this is the decision we are invited to make: The pain should not have the last word.

The pain should never have the last word.

Not in a love that matters. Not in a relationship we have chosen.

If I really love someone — really love them — how can one moment decide everything? One moment when the other person was tired, overwhelmed, having a bad day, not feeling well, saying something they themselves regret five minutes later.

A moment is not a person. A reaction is not an identity. A mistake is not a heart. And a moment of pain should not be allowed to decide what our love is worth.

That changes how we understand forgiveness.

Forgiveness does not say: What you did did not matter.

Forgiveness says: **What you did will not have the last word.**

Because love is bigger than the pain.

Not because the pain is small. The pain is real. It hurt.

But love is the stronger thing in us.

Pain happens. Love is chosen.

Again and again.

And we can only choose that way when we know each other's heart.

This is where Chapter Fifteen comes back, and why it had to come before repair.

When you know someone's heart, you don't have to weigh every word. And when you know someone's heart, you can forgive without betraying yourself.

Because when I know your heart, I can distinguish.

I can say: **I know your heart. And what just happened was not your heart.**

I know you were not yourself in that moment. Because I know who you are when you are yourself. And that was not you.

That was a bad day. That was exhaustion. That was an old wound that got loud.

That was not your intention toward me.

I know you were not yourself, because I know your heart, and that was not you.

That one sentence may be one of the most loving sentences we can ever speak.

It does not minimize the hurt. It was painful, and it matters that it was painful.

But it refuses to let a bad day rewrite the story of who you are to me.

That is why it is easier to forgive when you really know someone. Not because you say, “It doesn’t matter.” But because you can say, “I know it was not meant that way. I know where it came from. And I know who you are beyond it.”

There are two sides to return, and both need that knowing.

The first side is the one who caused the hurt.

To return from that side means to say something simple and difficult:

I hurt you.

Not, “I hurt you, but you also…”

Not, “I hurt you, but I had a bad day.”

Those things may be true, and there will be space to talk about them.

But not yet.

First, return says:

I see that you were hurt. And I was part of it. I am sorry. That was not how I want to love you. That was not me at my best, and I know you know my heart beyond that moment.

I am sorry does not mean I am a bad person.

It means I care that my actions reached you, and I want love to have the last word, not this moment.

The second side is the one who was hurt.

To return from that side means to hold two truths at the same time.

This moment was difficult. And I know who you are beyond this moment.

It hurt. And I still choose us.

I was wounded. And I know you did not intend to wound me. You were having a bad day, and it came out in the wrong place.

Perhaps that is where God comes back into our story, not as an argument, but as a model.

He does not forgive us by pretending we did not hurt Him, or each other, or ourselves.

He forgives by staying. By remaining in relationship while telling the truth about what happened. By refusing to let our worst moment become our name.

He does not call us by our mistake. He calls us by name.

He does not say, “It was nothing.”

He says, **“I saw it. And I am still here. Return to me. I know your heart, and that was not your heart.”**

That is return.

Not, “You have to earn your way back.”

But, **“The way back is open. Will you come?”**

In human love, that way back is rarely a single moment. It is a series of small decisions.

I turn toward you with honesty.

You turn toward me with openness.

I listen without defending.

You speak without weaponizing.

We both allow that repair takes time. That trust, once bruised, does not heal because we want it to heal quickly. It

heals because we keep choosing love over pain.

Sometimes return sounds like:

Can we talk again about yesterday? I have been thinking about it.

Sometimes it sounds like:

I was hurt when that happened. I still want us.

Sometimes it sounds like:

I know you were not yourself. I know your heart, and that was not you. I'm here. Let's find our way back.

None of those sentences erase the hurt.

All of them decide that the hurt will not be the final word.

Because love, if it is real, keeps choosing.

Not once. Again and again.

Even after pain.

Especially after pain.

We meet pain with what is stronger in us.

And the last word should always be **love**.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Truth and Repair

The last word should always be love.

We decided that in the last chapter. And it is true.

But love alone is not enough if we keep causing the same pain again and again.

Then love needs truth.

For a long time we thought repair and return were the same thing. But they are not.

Return is the moment we come back to each other.

Repair is what we do after we have come back.

Forgiveness restores relationship. Truth makes repair possible.

Return says: I come back to you. I choose us. The hurt will not have the last word.

Repair asks: What do we need to understand, to change, to learn, so that we do not keep getting hurt in the same place?

This is the shift that changes everything in this chapter.

The question is no longer:

Can we find our way back?

We have found our way back. We decided that love should have the last word.

The question now is:

Can we tell the truth about what happened once we have found our way back?

Because many couples find their way back. But they never find their way forward. They reconcile, but they do not repair. They say, “It’s okay again,” but they never ask, “What was actually happening for you? What was happening for me? What did we miss?”

And so the same moment returns. Not because they do not love each other. But because they loved each other enough to return, but not yet truthfully enough to repair.

Love without truth repeats. Love with truth repairs.

That is why truth is not the opposite of love. Truth is how love learns.

Repair begins with a simple, difficult willingness to look at what happened without immediately turning it into blame.

Not: Who was right?

But: What happened?

What was the story underneath the story?

This is where everything we learned in Chapter Twelve, Thirteen, and Fourteen becomes practical.

We learned to ask.

We learned to listen.

We learned that a moment is not a person and that a reaction is not an identity.

We learned that when you know someone's heart, you don't have to weigh every word.

Now we need all of that, after the hurt.

Because after hurt, asking becomes harder.

We have come back. But what do we do with what happened?

We do what we were afraid to do when we were still in the middle of it: we tell the truth.

Not to win. Not to prove who hurt whom more.

But to understand.

Repair asks questions that return alone does not yet ask:

What actually happened?

Not what we think happened. Not our interpretation. What was said? What was done? What was not said?

Why did it hurt?

Not just that it hurt, but why this particular thing touched this particular place. What did it mean to you when I was silent? What did it mean to me

when you raised your voice? What old story did it touch?

What did you need in that moment that you did not receive?

What did I need that I did not know how to ask for?

There is a difference between truth that weaponizes and truth that repairs.

Weaponized truth says: Let me tell you who you really are.

Repairing truth says: Let me tell you what I experienced, and let me hear what you experienced.

Weaponized truth wants to win the past.

Repairing truth wants to build the future.

That is why repair needs the two skills we practiced earlier:

Ask: What was that like for you?

And listen: I want to understand, not just to answer.

When we ask that way after hurt, we discover something we could not see in the middle of the hurt.

Often, what hurt was not only what was said, but what was not understood.

You needed reassurance, and I needed space.

You needed closeness, and I needed to calm down.

You heard criticism, and I meant exhaustion.

I heard rejection, and you meant fear.

None of that excuses the pain. But all of that explains it enough that we can learn from it.

Forgiveness says: I am willing to be in a relationship with you again.

Repair says: I am willing to understand this relationship better so we do not have to return to the same wound.

And here is where Chapter Twenty-One protects Chapter Twenty-Two.

Because only when we know that love will have the last word can we dare to tell the truth about what hurt.

Only when we know that the other person knows our heart can we say: This is what was difficult for me, without fearing that honesty will cost us the relationship.

Return makes truth safe. Truth makes return durable.

Without return, truth becomes an interrogation.

Without truth, return becomes a cycle.

We need both.

We return because love is bigger than the pain.

We repair because love wants to learn how to hurt each other less.

And perhaps that is also how God repairs with us.

He does not just forgive us and say, “Let’s go back to how it was.”

He stays. He returns. And then He teaches. Gently. Truthfully.

He says: Let me show you what happened in your heart. Let me show you what you were looking for. Let me show you a different way next time. Not because I am disappointed. But because I want you to be free.

That is repair.

Not punishment.

Not a lecture.

An invitation to learn together how to love better.

We have come back to each other. That was return.

We have told the truth about what happened. That was repair.

And now there is one decision left:

Will we keep choosing love?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Staying

And once we have returned and told the truth, there is still one decision left: Will we keep choosing this?

Return happens in a moment.

Repair happens in conversations.

Staying happens over time.

Many people know how to return. Many are learning how to repair.

But staying — really staying — is something else.

Staying is not the absence of doubt. It is not the absence of difficult days. It is not a feeling that never wavers.

Staying is the decision to keep choosing love after we know the cost.

Before we need each other,
commitment sounds romantic.

After we have hurt each other, returned, and told the truth, commitment sounds different. More sober. More real.

Because now we know.

We know that we can hurt each other.

We know that we will need to forgive.

We know that we will need to tell the truth again and again.

We know that love will not always feel light.

And we still say: **I want this. I choose this. I choose you.**

Not because it is easy. But because it is ours.

There is a difference between a contract and a commitment.

A contract says: I will stay as long as you fulfill your part.

A commitment says: I will stay and we will keep learning how to fulfill this together.

A contract is based on performance.

A commitment is based on presence.

A contract ends when one person fails.

A commitment says: When we fail, we will return. When we return, we will tell the truth. And when we tell the truth, we will learn again how to stay.

That is why staying is not passive.

Staying is not: I have nowhere else to go.

Staying is: **I have somewhere I want to be, and I will keep choosing to be here.**

In Hebrew, staying is yashav — not just about not leaving. It is about dwelling. About making a home. About saying: I will not just pass through your life. I will live here. With you. In this relationship. In this story.

We often think love is about finding the right person.

But staying teaches us that love is about becoming the right people, together.

That becoming does not happen in one big decision.

It happens in a thousand small ones.

Will I turn toward you when I would rather turn away?

Will I ask again when I think I already know?

Will I listen when I want to defend?

Will I remember your heart when I only see your reaction?

Will I let the last word be love, again?

Each of those small decisions is staying.

And staying, over time, becomes something you can feel.

It becomes trust. Not trust that we will never hurt each other. But trust that when we do, we know the way back.

It becomes safety. Not safety that there will be no bad days. But safety that a bad day will not be the end of us.

It becomes belonging. Not because we have never doubted. But because we have doubted and still chosen.

Perhaps that is what God means when He says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

He does not mean, “You will never feel alone.”

He means, “Even when you feel alone, I have not left. I am staying. I have chosen.”

His staying is not based on our performance. It is based on His presence.

And maybe our staying can begin to look like that.

Not perfect. But present.

Not without struggle. But willing.

Not saying, “I will stay if…”

But saying, **“I will stay and we will figure out the ifs together.”**

We started this phase with the recognition that we will hurt each other because we are touchable.

We moved through return: the pain will not have the last word.

We moved through truth: love needs truth to repair.

Now we arrive here: staying.

We have returned. We have told the truth. We have learned a little more about how to love.

And now we decide, not once, but again: **We will keep choosing this.**

Commitment is not the end of love. It is the beginning of becoming.

And if we keep choosing to stay, then the question is no longer will we stay, but who are we becoming as we stay?

PHASE X — BECOMING

Chapter Twenty-Four

Becoming Us

For most of our lives, we thought love was about finding.

Finding the right person. Finding the right relationship. Finding the right feeling.

But staying teaches us something different.

Love is not only about finding. Love is about becoming.

We do not only have a relationship. Over time, a relationship has us. It forms us.

We started this book with two questions.

What if you knew someone's heart?

How do you feel?

One story was about knowing. One story was about feeling.

We thought they were two different questions.

Now we see they were the same question all along.

Because when you know someone's heart and you stay, you begin to become someone new.

Not because you lose yourself. But because you are being shaped by the repeated choice to love.

Think about what we have practiced without calling it that.

We learned to ask instead of assume. That made us more curious.

We learned to listen instead of defend. That made us more humble.

We learned that a moment is not a person. That made us more gracious.

We learned that we need each other. That made us more honest.

We learned that pain should not have the last word. That made us more forgiving.

We learned that truth makes repair possible. That made us more courageous.

We learned to stay. That made us more faithful.

None of that is just a skill for this relationship.

All of that is who we are becoming because of this relationship.

Love is not just something we do. Love is something that does something to us.

That is why Phase X cannot be about techniques. There are no more techniques.

There is only becoming.

Becoming us.

There is a moment in every relationship that lasts, when the language shifts.

In the beginning, it is mostly “I” and “you.”

I feel. You feel. I need. You need. I hurt you. You hurt me.

And that language is important. We need it to tell the truth.

But over time, if we keep staying, a new word appears.

We.

We have been through difficult things.

We have learned how to return.

We have a way of finding our way back.

We know how we love.

That “we” is not automatic. It is not there from the start. It is built.

It is built from every time we chose love to have the last word.

It is built from every time we said: I know your heart, and that was not you.

It is built from every time we told the truth after we returned.

It is built from every small decision to stay.

We is not the beginning of love. We is what love becomes when it stays.

And perhaps that is what God has meant all along when He talks about becoming.

He does not only want to have a relationship with us.

He wants to form us. To make us more like love itself.

Not by forcing us. But by staying with us. By returning to us. By telling us the truth in love. By choosing us again and again until we slowly begin to choose like Him.

We become what we repeatedly choose.

If we repeatedly choose to defend, we become defended.

If we repeatedly choose to withdraw, we become distant.

If we repeatedly choose to return, to tell the truth, to let love have the last word and to stay — we become people who know how to love.

Not perfect people.

But becoming people.

People who are becoming more curious, more gracious, more forgiving, more faithful.

People who are becoming us.

And if that is true — if we are really becoming us — then there is one more question we need to ask.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Love as Space

And if we are becoming us, then love must also create space for who we are becoming.

For most of our lives we thought love was about filling.

Filling the silence.
Filling the gap.
Filling the need.
Filling the other person with our answers.

We thought if we could just give enough, say enough, do enough, love would be secure.

But staying teaches us something else.

Love does not always fill the space.
Sometimes love creates space.

Not empty space.
Not distance.
Not the cold freedom of Chapter Five where we needed to prove we could stand alone.

A different kind of space.

The space where the other can breathe. Can become. Can be.

Think about how we learned love in the beginning.

In Chapter One we asked: Where do we learn how love works?

We learned it by watching. We did not learn love as a theory. We learned it by watching people.

But here is the problem:

If you make a copy of a copy of a copy, what happens?

The first copy is still clear. The second is a little blurrier. The third is a little fainter. By the tenth copy, you can hardly read the original anymore.

That is what happens when we learn love only from people who learned love only from people.

We were not taught badly on purpose. But we were taught from copies.

And copies degrade.

A father who never learned tenderness cannot copy tenderness.

A mother who learned that need is dangerous cannot copy safe needing.

A culture that learned that freedom means distance cannot copy freedom that stays.

So if all we have are copies, we will spend our whole lives trying to sharpen a blurry picture.

And a blurry picture cannot create space. It can only fill space, out of fear. It fills the silence because it does not know how to hold it. It fills the gap with answers because it is afraid of questions.

To create space, we must return to the source.

Not to a better copy. To the original.

To the place where love existed first.

And that is why Jesus says something so strange and so simple that we almost miss it.

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

He does not say: Become more expert. Become more mature in the way the world means mature. Become more independent.

He says: Become like children.

Why?

What do children do that we have unlearned?

Two things.

First: Children learn from being with the Father.

A child does not learn love from a lecture about love. A child learns love by being with the father. Sitting on the floor while he works. Watching how he answers the phone. Watching how he handles disappointment. Watching how he makes space.

Deep calls to deep. We become like the one we are with.

If we want to know what love is, we cannot keep studying copies. We have to go back to being with the Father. Not the earthly one who also learned from copies. The heavenly one who is love.

Second: Children ask.

What does a child do all day?

It asks.

Why is the sky blue?

Where does the rain go?

Can I try?

What is that?

Why?

A child is not afraid of not knowing. A child is curious. A child is hungry to know.

I want to know what love is. That was Chapter Eleven. That was the song that started seeking. That question was childlike.

And then Chapter Twelve: Ask. A real question is not designed to get the answer I want. It is designed to discover the truth.

Children ask because they trust that there is an answer. And they trust that the one they are asking will not shame them for asking.

We stopped asking because we thought we should already know. Or because we were afraid the answer would be different from what we expected — that was Chapter Four.

But children have not yet learned to be afraid of the answer. They just want to know.

That was the line from Chapter Eleven. Now we understand why.

The child in us is what keeps love moving.

When we become like children again, we do not become less. We become more open.

More willing to say: I don't know yet. Tell me. I want to understand.

More willing to say: I need you.

More willing to create space instead of filling it.

Because this is what the Father does with us.

He does not fill every space with noise. He creates space for us to become.

He does not force. He invites.

He does not shame our questions. He welcomes them.

And that is what love as space finally means.

In the beginning, we thought freedom was not distance. And it is not.

Now we see: Love as space is not distance either.

Love as space is the Father's way of loving.

It says: I am here. I am not going anywhere — that is staying. And within my staying, there is room for you. Room to ask. Room to become. Room to return. Room to be not yet finished and still fully loved.

We do not have to become impressive to be loved.

We have to become childlike enough to let ourselves be taught again.

Not by copies.

By the source.

What is love, when we finally see it clearly at the source?

Chapter Twenty-Six

What Love Is

And if we have learned to become like children again, then perhaps we are finally ready to ask the first question one more time — but as different people.

In Chapter Eleven, we played a song.
I want to know what love is.

We were not looking for a definition. We were looking for something true enough to live in.

So we started walking.

And if you look back at the path now, it was never a straight line. It was a becoming.

We learned where we first learned love — from copies.

We learned that need is not weakness.
We learned that love without freedom is not love, and freedom without choosing is just distance.
We learned that we project stories onto people and then call the story the person.
We learned that relationship becomes a mirror.
We learned that maybe the best in us was already there, waiting for space.

And then we learned to ask.
To ask open questions instead of closing ones.
To listen without immediately correcting.

We learned to know a heart, so that a moment would not have to be a person, a reaction would not have to be an identity, a mistake would not have to be a heart.

When you know someone's heart, you don't have to weigh every word.

We learned to say:

I am free. And I need you.
You need me too.
We need each other.

And the bravest one:

I will let myself be needed without pulling away.

Because we matter to each other, we became touchable. And because we became touchable, we hurt each other.

So we had to learn to return.

Not to erase. But to refuse to let hurt have the last word.

I know you were not yourself, because I know your heart, and that was not you.

And the last word should always be love.

We learned that forgiveness restores relationships, but truth makes repair possible.

We learned to stay. Not because there were no doubts. But because we decided to keep choosing after we knew the cost.

Commitment is not the end of love. It is the beginning of becoming.

We learned that over time, a relationship does not only belong to us. It has us. It forms us.

We is not the beginning of love. We is what love becomes when it stays.

We learned that love does not fill every space.

Love creates space.

And then, just now, we learned why all of it had to lead here.

Because copies get blurry.

If we only ever learn love from people who learned love from people, the picture fades.

We have to return to the source.

We have to become like children again. Not less mature. More true.

Children who are with the Father long enough that they start to look like Him.

Children who are curious enough to keep asking:

Why? What is that? Tell me. I want to understand.

So what is love, when we finally see it clearly at the source?

We have been trying to define it for twenty-five chapters.

But maybe love was never meant to be defined like a dictionary.

Maybe love is meant to be recognized by the way it moves.

We thought we wanted a definition we could memorize.

What we needed was a way we could live.

Because at the source, love does not come to us as a definition.

It comes to us as a person.

It comes as one who is free — and chooses us.

One who knows us — not just what we did, but our heart.

One who asks us open questions:

Where are you? What do you need?

One who listens.

One who knows that a moment is not a person.

One who says:

I know your heart, and that was not you.

One who needs us — not because He is weak, but because He lets our lives matter to His.

One who lets us need Him without shame.

One who is touchable — who lets Himself be hurt rather than stay distant.

One who returns to us, even when we have left.

One who tells us the truth, not to win, but to repair.

One who stays.

One who creates space for us to become.

One who calls us children, so we can learn love again from the beginning, but this time from the original.

This is what love is.

Not an idea we master. A movement we are drawn into.

Not something we figure out once. Something we become, over time, by staying with the source.

John says it simplest:

We love because He first loved us.

We do not start love. We respond to it. We become because He first became.

That is why it has always been calling.

Deep calls to deep.

Your deep — your need, your questions, your longing to know what love is — has been calling to His deep all along.

And His deep — His freedom, His knowing, His heart, His staying — has been calling back to yours.

That call is not noise. It is space. It is home.

So we end where we began. Not with a definition to memorize, but with a Father to be with. And with the courage to become like children again.

Because only children enter the kingdom.

Not because they are small.

But because they still know how to be with, how to ask, how to receive, and how to become. **And the last word should always be love.**

Epilogue

A Beginning

For a long time I thought this book was about finding an answer. About finally understanding what love is.

I followed one question after the other. One question led to the next. One insight opened the door for the next.

I thought I was searching for myself.

But now, at the end, I see it differently.

I could not have done this alone.

It takes two. It takes a counterpart. It always did.

Jesus said: Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. I always read that as a promise of

His presence. Now I read it as a description of how He works.

The first question of this whole book was not mine. It was a friend's question. He said:

"I want to know what love is. Can you tell me?"

That question stayed with me. I started searching. And if I am honest, I was only ever asking for a friend.

And while I was asking for him, my own question was answered. A question I had carried for a very long time — quietly, for years — what my own part is, what my calling is.

I always thought a calling had to be loud. A stage. A title. Now I think it can be very quiet.

Maybe calling is simply this: to be willing to ask for a friend. To carry his

question as if it were your own. And to become, for a moment, the vessel for an answer that was never meant for you alone, but to be brought back.

We cannot make love. We can make a lot of things. We can make plans, careers, houses, even families. But we cannot make love itself.

We think: We are the makers, and love is what we make.

The truth is: **God is the Maker, and we are the ones being made. Love is what makes us.**

There is only one Maker.

God is the Maker. The Only Maker.

We are not the manufacturers of love. We are the receivers. The learners. The ones who stay with the Source and learn to live what we have received.

As long as we try to make love, we will only produce copies. Blurry copies.

But when we stay with the Maker, we don't have to make it. We can live it. And it can grow. And in growing, it makes us new.

That is exactly what Jesus meant when He said:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. — John 13:34

He did not say: Love your partner as I have loved you.

He said: **Love one another. Every relationship. Every human connection.**

Not just romantic love. Not just the love between two partners.

Parent and child. Friend and friend. Brother and sister. Neighbor and stranger. Even enemy.

As I have loved you.

Not: As you were loved by people, so love people.

But: As I have loved you — so learn to live love with one another. In every relationship.

That changes everything.

When we both put God in the center, we stop demanding that the other has to show us what love is. We stop expecting a blurry copy to be the source.

Instead, we learn it together from the One who can show us. Side by side. As children of the same Father.

Maybe our need for one another is not a flaw in the design. Maybe it is part of the design.

One carries a question. Another carries another. Neither has everything. And somehow, by carrying one another's questions, we become part of the answer.

We only find ourselves by way of the other.

That is not something to be afraid of.

That is something beautiful.

There is one more thing this whole journey has taught me.

None of this works without freedom.

God could have made us self-sufficient — independent, self-contained beings who only connect when necessary.

But He did not.

He made us relational. Needing. Open.

And that means love can never be automatic.

Love is always an invitation.

And an invitation can be refused.

You don't have to need less. You were made to need.

But you still have to let yourself need.

You have to let yourself ask.

You have to let yourself receive.

You have to let yourself be known.

When you ask, you give up control.

I want to know what love is also means: I don't know.

When you need someone, you become vulnerable.

I need you also means: You have the ability to hurt me.

But the price of protecting ourselves from being hurt can be that we also close the space where love wants to move.

Perhaps that is why one person carrying another person’s question matters so much.

One person says:

I don’t know. I want to know.

And another says:

Then I will stay with you while we find out.

That sounds small.

But perhaps that is all it takes.

Where two people are willing to enter that space together, something more can happen.

Not because either one has all the answers.

But because neither has to have them alone.

And maybe that is what Deep calls to Deep has meant all along.

One person's deep calls to another person's deep.

One person's question reaches into another person's life.

One carries what the other cannot carry alone.

And somehow, in that space between us, God meets us.

We are not the Maker.

We are not the source.

But we can become carriers.

We can carry what we have received to one another.

We can become, for a moment, God's answer to one another.

Not because we know everything.

But because we are willing to ask. To stay. To listen. To receive. To be taught.

And then to bring what we have received back.

I started out asking for a friend.

And in asking for him, I found the answer was never meant to be kept.

It was meant to be carried.

About the Author

I have spent much of my life learning things I wish someone had taught me earlier.

Not because I was looking for a book to write about them, but because life has a way of teaching us through the places where our carefully constructed answers stop working.

My own journey has taken me through love, disappointment, loss, wrong turns, healing, faith, and the slow discovery that I do not have to understand everything before I can take the next step.

For many years, I thought strength meant being able to manage things on my own. I learned to carry responsibilities, to keep going, to find solutions, and to be there for other people. What I did not always understand was that strength and self-sufficiency are not the same thing.

Somewhere along the way, God began teaching me a different kind of strength.

A strength that can admit, “ I don’t know.”

A strength that can say, “ I need you.”

A strength that can ask instead of guess.

A strength that can let go of control and trust that not everything has to be made to happen.

Writing has always been how I learn. I don't write because I have answers. I write because putting a truth into words lets me see it for the first time.

This book began with a friend's question:

"I want to know what love is."

I carried his question as my own. And while I was asking for him, God answered a question I had carried quietly for years: what my part is.

I don't write this as someone who has figured love out.

I write as someone who is still learning.

Still asking.

Still becoming.

Still walking with God.

Perhaps that is why the title feels so right to me.

Deep calls to deep.

I believe some questions are invitations.

Some encounters change the direction of our lives.

And sometimes, when we are brave enough to follow one question all the way down, we discover that it was leading us toward God all along.

That is the journey I am inviting you to take with me.

📘 Back Cover Text

"I want to know what love is. Can you tell me?"

It started with a friend's question. It became a journey.

For a long time we thought love was something we had to make happen. To find. To figure out. To get right.

But what if we've been looking in the wrong place?

What if love was never meant to be manufactured — but to be learned? Not as a definition to memorize, but as a movement to live in?

Deep Calls to Deep follows one question through twenty-six chapters — from the copies where we first learned love, through need and freedom, projection and mirrors, asking and listening, hurt and return, staying and becoming.

Until we discover that copies get blurry. And we have to return to the source.

This is not a book about how to fix your relationship. This is a book about how love fixes us — when we are willing to become like children again, and learn from the beginning, from the One who first loved us.

For everyone who has ever wondered if they were doing love wrong — and is willing to slow down long enough to discover there is another way. A way of always letting love have the last word.